

## solemn prayer, poppy in my hair

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# solemn prayer, poppy in my hair

by [congee4lunch](#)

## Summary

“Don’t kill me,” Soap blurts out and, Christ, that was not a good start. Ghost raises a brow, waiting for the bomb to drop. “But, uh, want to be my boyfriend?”

when soap invites ghost back home to scotland for a week, ghost hadn't imagined he would wind up in a fake dating scheme to trick soap's family, of all people. it also doesn't help that he's head over heels in love with soap, of all people.

# a foreign home

## Chapter Notes

what if silly little military men fake dated huh what then

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“L.t.,” Soap says to him, one day. “Do you want to come home with me?”

Ghost, who had been in the middle of sharpening his knives at Soap’s desk, drops his blade to the ground with a dull clatter.

“What,” he says and his voice comes out flat, unamused.

Soap laughs like he doesn’t have a care in the world. “You heard me,” he leans back on his perch on his bed. “I’ve heard Scotland is fucking beautiful this time of year.”

Ghost grimaces and reaches down to grab his knife.

“And I thought I was the unfunny one.”

“You still are,” Soap says, in the same light tone.

“Then explain this joke to me,” The knife is cool in his palm and as he twists it, the blade grazes along his skin, sharp and ready to cut through him completely. If only he pushed a little harder. If only he wished for it. “Because I’m not seeing the humor in this.”

“I’m not pulling your leg, Ghost,” Soap interjects and he sits up, spine straight. “I want you to come home with me while we’re on leave.”

Ghost frowns, but before he can outright reject Soap, the other man keeps talking.

“Price isn’t gonna give you any missions or work for a week. Staying at the base with nothing to do is gonna drive you up the fucking wall. There’s no use staying here.”

Apparently exhausted at their workaholic tendencies, their captain had essentially threatened him and Soap with a week of leave and Ghost had been trying not to think about the fact that he had been

*forced* on vacation. Until Soap had brought it up, that is.

Ghost raises a brow, though he knows the other can't see it behind the balaclava. "And what would I be doing in Scotland? For a whole bloody week?"

Soap flashes him a grin. Ghost's heart, though tight with some foreign feeling of discomfort, remembers to skip a beat at the sight of it. He holds his knife a little tighter to keep himself from standing up and tracing that glorious smile with his own mouth.

*Focus on the matter at hand, Ghost.*

"Wearing a kilt hopefully," Soap says. "You've got the legs for it."

"Checking out your superiors, now, Sergeant?" Ghost drawls.

"Only the bonnie ones."

"Oh? Anyone in particular?"

Soap looks him up and down, green eyes half-lidded, and Ghost's pulse quickens.

"You wouldn't know 'im." Fuck, it should be illegal for someone's voice to sound like that, almost dripping with velvet and heat. Fucking Christ. A flash of warmth crosses Ghost's face at the sound and he finds himself leaning forward in his chair, resting his forearms on his spread thighs.

"Humor me." He hears his own voice turn rough.

"He's very, ah, competent," Soap hums. "In the field."

"Go on."

"Commanding."

"Huh."

Soap licks his lips and Ghost can almost taste them on his own tongue.

"British, unfortunately."

"Didn't know you had a secret thing for Brits, Johnny."

Soap scoffs, like Ghost insulted his entire bloodline. “No. But Captain Price makes it work.”

*Price...*

Ghost blinks as Soap howls in laughter.

“Fuck off,” he says, with feeling.

“This is *my* room.”

“Yeah, shut the door on your way out, Sergeant.”

Still snickering, Soap stands; but, instead of turning to listen to Ghost’s command, he pivots and ends up standing in front of Ghost’s chair. Instinct tells Ghost to reach for him, to draw him in between his spread legs, and to never let go.

He barely resists the overwhelming urge, knuckles tightening around his knife, gripping onto the sting of reality.

“Oi,” Soap frowns down at him. Ghost snaps out of the haze of want.

“Yeah?”

“Where’s your head at, L.t.?” Soap bats his eyelashes, like he knew it was enough to send Ghost’s entire face flushing crimson. “Picturing something dirty?”

Ghost *hates* him.

“Picturing something alright,” He replies, as dry as he can manage. “Picturing shanking you.”

“Can you shank me in Scotland?” Soap is *relentless*. “It would be great to die in the motherland.”

“Shut up, Soap, fucking hell.”

Smiling softly, Soap places his hand on Ghost’s shoulder.

The weight of it sends tremors shooting down Ghost’s body. He wants to shove Soap to the ground and rip him apart with his teeth. He wants to move that callused palm to his face and let Soap hold him. He wants everything but to pull away. The feeling swells in Ghost’s ribcage, expanding and collapsing in on itself like a second, more fragile heart.

How strange it was to *want* .

In the end, he does nothing, because Soap is his friend, his subordinate, and his one good thing in life.

After a moment of hesitation, Ghost tilts his head back and watches the man before him, gorgeous even under the fluorescent lights of their base.

“I want you to come home with me,” Soap says. “Will you?”

Ghost blinks.

Something in his chest aches.

He had, through the course of several painstaking realizations, come to know Soap as his home. He had never thought he could have another one again, not after everything that had happened in his last one—the murder, the blood, the corpses who were once loved. He had been proven wrong.

The twinge in his chest is something born of both fear and adoration. He doesn’t know what to do with it, so he keeps it in his pocket.

Soap’s fingers are warm on his bicep. Ghost doesn’t remember when he ever let someone this close enough to even think of doing what Soap was doing.

But Soap had always been somewhat of an exception.

“Okay,” Ghost replies. “Okay, Johnny.”

The flight to Glasgow, Scotland is, well, fine, actually.

Soap falls asleep minutes into the flight, snoring on Ghost’s shoulder. It shouldn’t be as cute as it is, but Ghost spends the whole flight hardly daring to shift so as to not wake the other.

When they finally land, Soap blinks awake, scrubbing a hand through his overgrown mohawk.

“Fuck,” he mutters, husky and low from sleep. “Did I sleep through all

of that?"

"Drooled through the entire flight too," Ghost says and watches as embarrassment flushes through Soap's face.

"Aw shit, L.t.," Soap starts. "I'm sorry—"

"It's fine," Ghost cuts him off. He swallows back a lump in his throat. "You were, uh, fine."

Soap regards him for a minute with a strange expression Ghost can't unravel.

"Thanks for the shoulder," is all he says in response. "It was more comfortable than I thought it would be."

Ghost raises his brow. "You've been thinking about my shoulders, Sergeant?"

Soap grumbles something unintelligible and reaches into their overhead compartment to grab their suitcases. The back of his neck is bright red. Ghost wants to bite it until it's purple.

They head off the airplane and into the bustling life of the airport. Soap charges full steam ahead and blabbers on about the best places they can visit, the worst, and everywhere tourists flock to but really shouldn't because they're 110% likely to get scammed. Ghost listens, fighting the urge to reach for Soap's hand and stop him from running off to god knows where.

They're more or less on equal grounds on the battlefield, but here, Soap seems to burst alive with a form of life Ghost doesn't know how to conjure out of his own bones and rotting flesh.

"L.t.," Soap calls out to him, enthusiasm coloring his voice golden. "We should drop by my flat, first, then I'll take you to the best places in toon."

"Charming," Ghost drawls. "You expecting me to put out too?"

Soap looks him up and down, his tongue poking out of the corner of his mouth.

"Didn't think you were that easy, sir."

"I'm not," Ghost says, like he wouldn't get down on his knees for the fantastical man before him, with only a flash of his green eyes and

twisting smile.

“I’ll work for it then,” Soap all but purrs, and, God, Ghost is going to lose his mind and he’s only been in Scotland for all but fifteen minutes.

He clears his throat and looks away, scratching his cheek where the scar of his faded Glasgow smile splits the skin. He’s not wearing a mask, it’s a little inconvenient to wear one in a public setting like an airport, and the lack of it itches like a bad rash.

Shortly, they’re in a cab, driving towards the direction of Soap’s apartment. Soap sits in the front seat, excitedly chattering away in an almost unintelligible Scottish accent with the cabbie and stopping every few seconds to whip his head around to point something out to Ghost, who sits in the back.

“That restaurant’s pure bogging,” he says, and “Ghost, I have to take you there, you’ll love it, sir.”

Ghost hums in affirmation and nods along when appropriate.

More than once, the cabbie glances in the rearview mirror at Ghost, his eyes flickering over his face. Ghost tries not to bury it into his collar, irritated at the way he could feel the man’s curious gaze on his scars, lingering on his glasgow smile. His fingers itch for a knife or gun, anything to make the sensation of stares go away.

After the third time, Soap glances back at him, something like a plea in his eyes. *Don’t blow his brains out*, Ghost can almost hear him saying. *I don’t want to face murder charges here, of all places, L.t.*

Ghost settles for glaring at the other man until he swallows nervously and looks away. Soap exhales and strikes up a conversation with the cabbie.

When they arrive at a modest-looking apartment building overlooking the rest of the city, Soap hops out the car. He barely lingers long enough to collect their bags and pay the cabbie, before he’s barreling towards the building. Ghost chases after him.

Maybe this was what owning a puppy was like.

Soap’s apartment is nice. A bit more barren and less messy than Ghost would have expected, but still nice. A living room with a tv, a kitchen, one bedroom, one bath, and a spare room. There’s a thin layer of dust



over almost everything, but the few plants Soap has on his windowsill are alive and well.

“Maw comes in sometimes to water the plants and make sure everything’s alright,” he explains, toeing off his shoes. “Only when she’s in Glasgow, though.”

“Your parents don’t live in the city?” Ghost asks, following Soap as he makes his way to the living room. He tugs his balaclava on his face and his heart relaxes somewhat at the familiar weight of it on his skin.

“They live in a toon called Lanark, just south of here,” Soap replies. “I grew up there, actually.”

“Really now.”

Soap was an endlessly friendly guy, always talking and including the rest of 141 and anyone he could get his hands on in conversations. Yet, it’s only now that Ghost realizes that Soap rarely revealed much about his life back home. Pot calling the kettle and all that, but Ghost couldn’t help but want to learn more.

To excavate the man before him and study him, bones and all, until he could get a clear grasp of who he was.

“Aye. Got an place out here after I joined the military,” Soap gestures to his home. “They stayed behind.”

As Ghost ambles over to the spare room to put away his things, he wonders if Soap’s planning on seeing them at all, this week. He knows Soap has at least one sibling, though he’s unsure of how many or the gender(s). Other than that, though, he knows little else about his family.

Were they kind? As loud, yet loving as Soap was? Or were they quieter? Colder?

He thinks of laughter rumbling through bathroom stalls and skull face masks staring him down in the dead of night. He thinks of a home in Manchester with blood pooling out of the cracks and windows, staining the streets a vivid red.

*Fuck.*

Ghost frowns and rubs at his eyes.

*Fucking hell, he really was going insane.*

“It’s the Scottish air,” he mutters to the room at large. “Nothing else.”

The distant sound of Soap banging around in the kitchen is all that responds back to his lies.

Soap takes him bar hopping that night.

Glasgow nightlife is nothing like Manchester, with all its violent and crimson delights, but Ghost finds himself having a good time in this city.

Maybe it has nothing to do with the city itself, and everything to do with the man beside him, flushed from the buzz of alcohol.

“S fun, right?” Soap asks him at their fourth bar. They’re seated in a dim corner, with Ghost nursing a bourbon and Soap making his way through a gin and tonic. Ghost rolls his eyes and pulls his mask down just so, and swigs from his drink, tasting the bitter liquid gliding down his throat.

“Don’t have to sell me on your home, Johnny,” he says into the glass. “I’m already here, aren’t I?”

“That you are,” Soap says. He watches Ghost for a second, eyes so hazy that Ghost almost loses himself in the midst of them. When Soap leans forward, elbows on the tiny table that separate the two, he can’t help but sway forward as well—entranced.

“Scotland looks good on you, sir,” he whispers, like it’s a secret.

Ghost’s face flames and he quickly pulls down his mask. He’s suddenly very grateful that he’s chosen to wear the balaclava out tonight, occasional public staring be damned. He coughs.

“Thanks,” he manages, like an idiot.

Soap grins broadly.

“I might say it looks better than Britain—”

“Stop while you still can.”

Soap’s laugh is an extraordinary conductor of light and something in Ghost’s chest sparks to life at the sound of it, luminous and warm. It’s only then he realizes how intimate they look right now, practically leaning across the table to get closer to each other, staring each other down.

He can count the number of faded freckles dusting Soap’s cheeks. Ghost swallows.

After a pause, he opens his mouth, ready to tell Soap that he looks different in Scotland too, a good sort of different, when a voice cuts through his thoughts.

“John?” Someone calls out. “John, that you, mate?”

A man looms over their table, his eyes fixed on Soap.

Soap blinks up at him, clearly startled, before breaking out into a surprised sort of smile.

“James.”

Soap and...James embrace like long-lost brothers, their thick Scottish accents twisting their words into almost incomprehensible chatter as Ghost watches them. He doesn’t think that they’re siblings, but their identical thick eyebrows and sharp cheekbones suggest a common genetic link between the two.

Cousins, maybe?

“What are you doin’ in toon?” Soap asks, pulling away from James. “Thought you were abroad for work?”

“That’s my question, you daftie,” James shakes his head. “You told Auntie and Uncle that yer back in town, yet?”

Soap shrugs, though the downturn of his mouth betrays his cool facade. “Haven’t got the time. I’ll call Maw and Dad tomorrow.”

Cousins it was then.

James claps him on the shoulder. “Good man,” he says and turns to Ghost with a quirk of his brow. “And who is this?”

His words hold a strange emphasis that Ghost can’t really dissect, but

Soap flushes a crimson red at the sound of his words.

“He’s my lieutenant in the task force,” he says. “Goes by, er—”

“Ghost,” Ghost introduces himself with a nod.

“Lieutenant, eh?” James asks, and the look on his face is both disbelieving and amused. “And you’re both in Glasgow because...”

“Temporary leave,” Ghost grunts.

“Converting him into abandoning his British roots,” Soap says at the same time. “We have a better football team, anyway.”

Ghost goes to swipe Soap’s drink from him, out of petty annoyance, and Soap careens back, clutching his glass close to his chest. The liquid sloshes every which way before splashing onto his shirt. Soap curses.

“The only thing you Scots are better at, apparently,” Ghost drawls.

“Awa’ an bile yer heid.” Soap is clearly just a few drinks away from blasted.

Ghost huffs and stands. Gently, he pries the glass away from Soap’s hands and sets it down on the table. Soap blinks up at him through his thick dark lashes, confused.

“L.t—”

“Up and at ‘em, Johnny,” Ghost says, reaching out a hand to help the drunker man up. “Think it’s time to head back home, yeah?”

“I could take ‘im back if you want,” James pipes in from behind Ghost. “No need to trouble yerself, Lieutenant.”

Ghost barely spares him a glance back. “It’s alright. MacTavish is my responsibility.”

“Really,” James says. “I can call ‘im a cab. You can head back to yer hotel—”

“No, no,” Soap interrupts them, shaking his head. He takes Ghost’s hand, his palms warm and rough on top of his, and hoists himself up. “I’m not completely blootered, James. Besides, he’s staying at mine.”

“Oh,” James’s voice is nothing short of curious. “Is he?”

“Yeah,” Ghost says, stiffly. “And we should be going.”

After throwing down their money on the table, he nudges Soap towards the exit. Soap, despite his earlier declarations of relative sobriety, stumbles after a few steps.

Ghost throws an arm around his waist, keeping him from crashing into the ground.

“So clumsy,” he teases.

His hand presses to Soap’s sternum, keeping him grounded. His other hand helps Soap wrap an arm around his shoulders.

“I could diffuse a bomb in a minute,” Soap mutters.

“You couldn’t diffuse a cherry bomb in the state you’re in.”

Soap lets out a relatively outraged cry before slumping against Ghost, lending him half of his body weight. He’s warm, really warm against Ghost.

With an incline of his head to James, Ghost ushers Soap out the door,

The burst of the cold night air is a sudden surprise after having been inside for a while. Ghost feels the shivers wracking Soap’s body and, without thinking, draws him closer to his chest. It’s more for his own benefit, if anything, Soap’s practically a human furnace.

Nonetheless, Soap leans into him and buries his nose into Ghost’s throat. His skin brushes against Ghost’s balaclava.

Ghost’s heart skips so many beats, he fears he might go into cardiac arrest.

“Ghost,” Soap murmurs as they walk down the street. His lips brush bare skin where Ghost’s balaclava ends just above the collar of his jacket. The shudder that wracks Ghost’s body then has nothing to do with the chill of night.

“Soap,” he parrots back.

“I’m really glad you came along,” he whispers.

“You wouldn’t stop chatting my ear off about it,” Ghost chokes out. God, Soap’s lips, somehow both chapped and soft, feel like heaven against his skin. “Had to see what the fuss was about.”

Soap hums and Ghost can feel it vibrate through his whole body. “And?” he asks. “What’s the final rating, L.t.?”

“To be determined.”

Soap laughs, a wistful thing. “That right?”

They slow to a stop. Soap turns to him, his eyes bright under the moonlight. Ghost blinks at him, suddenly feeling like the air in his lungs has escaped him, fleeing to some coffin underground to give life to yet another corpse.

“Simon,” Soap says, and God, he’s so beautiful that every part of Ghost crumbles.

“Simon,” Soap murmurs again as Ghost draws him nearer, until one of Ghost’s legs is in between Soap’s, and their entire bodies are plastered together, melting into a cacophony of limbs and winter coats.

Ghost’s arm falls to encircle Soap’s hips and with a quiet whine, Soap loops both his arms around Ghost’s neck, trapping him in the confines of muscle and fabric. It’s suffocating and exhilarating all at once.

Their foreheads knock together, met by Soap craning his neck upwards and Ghost lowering his chin, and they stay frozen like that for a beat. It hurts to hold Soap, there’s a wrongness in having someone like him staring up at Ghost with stars in his eyes. They don’t fit, like pieces of a precious vase pressed against shards of broken glass, and Ghost *aches* because of it, in spite of it.

“Simon,” the name is a mantra on Soap’s lips and, God, it hurts to listen to.

“Johnny,” he whispers, face contorting under his mask.

Soap tilts his head closer, maybe chasing after a kiss, maybe just moving for the sake of moving—Ghost doesn’t know.

What he does know is that he suddenly *can’t* do this.

He pushes himself away and squeezes his eyes shut, counting to ten in his head.

When he opens his eyes again, he doesn’t look at Soap’s face.

“Let’s go home,” he tells the other man.

Soap stays silent.

The walk back is long and quiet, with only the laughter of drunken passersby and the glow of the moon to keep them company.

Ghost is ready to book it back to the base, first thing in the morning.

He doesn't care if it's a coward's way out, he just needs to leave. After last night, he didn't know how to face Soap with a straight face.

Would Soap even remember what happened? How drunk had the other man been?

Ghost is in the middle of contemplating how rude it would be to just write a note and leave, when a knock outside the spare room interrupts his thoughts. He stiffens.

"Come in," he says, and immediately winces at the way he sounds. Stilted and cold.

Soap barrels in, his chest heaving and eyes wide.

Ghost stands, alarmed at *his* alarm. All thoughts of abandoning ship disappear into smoke at the sight of Soap so...panicked. For a split second, he wonders if Price called about Makarov or another national-level threat.

"Soap," he barks out. "Talk to me."

Soap stares at him.

"L.t.," he says, and fuck, he sounds wrecked and not in a good way. "I think I just fucked up."

Ghost nears, an additional wave of concern cresting in his chest now. "Talk to me," he repeats.

"Don't kill me," Soap blurts out and, Christ, that was not a good start. Ghost raises a brow, waiting for the bomb to drop. "But, uh, want to be my boyfriend?"

*What.*

## Chapter End Notes

starting a new wip...hello lgbt community.

in all honesty, this fic has kinda just been sitting in my drafts and i finally managed to write a third of it after finals ended :0 stay tuned for more and thank you so so much for reading.



# both hands on the wheel

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It takes a few seconds for Ghost to remember his own name.

Soap's words ring in his head, looping over and over again like a broken record. If the broken record was designed to torture Ghost and Ghost specifically. *Want to be my boyfriend? Want to be my boyfriend? Want to—*

"Run that by me again," he manages, through his collapsing lungs.

He had never known Soap to be a cruel prankster, one who cracked jokes that were meant to maim and cut, but now as he stands in the other's apartment, the age-old feeling of being the butt of the universe's joke comes crawling back. He stares at Soap who looks back at him and pales at whatever he sees in Ghost's eyes.

"Never mind," he says, quickly. "That was really stupid of me, L.t, sorry. Pretend I never said anything. Pretend I wasn't even here, actually."

And he has the audacity to put a hand on the doorknob, like he's about to leave Ghost standing there, with his entire world flipped on its axis. Like the *hell* he fucking was.

"John," The name comes out low and Soap freezes at it, his shoulders stiffening into a straight line. "Turn the fuck around."

Soap hesitates, then, slowly, he turns to face Ghost again. Ghost can't even bring himself to relax at that, his mind and body are already on full kick, trying to make sense of everything.

"I thought I told you to run that by me again," he says, through clenched teeth. "So do it."

"Mam called me this morning," Soap blurts out. "And she was right pissed because James, the fuckin' clipe, called and told her I was back. But, uh, he thought I didn't tell her that I was in Scotland because, well..."

“Spit it out, Johnny.”

Soap exhales.

“Because of you.”

“Me?” Ghost has never been more lost in his life. “Why the hell?”

“He thought you were my boyfriend and I didn’t want to introduce you to my family yet.”

*Fucking. Hell.*

Ghost tries not to think about the implications of that statement *alone*.

“Okay,” he pinches the bridge of his nose. “Okay, so why didn’t you just *tell her the truth?* ”

Soap laughs, awkwardly. Ghost, thoroughly stripped raw and questioning everything in his existence, almost guts him for it. He stops himself from pulling out a knife only at Soap’s next words.

“I, uh, came out to them last year.”

Ghost stares.

Soap shrugs. “Grew up in a small town, in a Roman Catholic family, I always thought something was different about me, but I didn’t have the words or willpower to name it. Didn’t even fully admit it to myself ‘till I joined the military.” The look in his eyes is somewhat wistful and Ghost bites his tongue to keep himself from asking if Soap had some *help* coming to that certain realization from a man,

He also, hypothetically, wants to hunt down whoever this hypothetical man (or men) is and bury a bullet into his hypothetical gut.

“How’d your family take it?” He asks, instead.

Soap frowns. “They weren’t outright cunts about it, but they also didn’t think it could be true. It didn’t seem real that John, the high school football star and active S.A.S. soldier, was a raging queer. My dad thought it was a joke at first, actually.”

“Strange joke to make.”

“Tell me about it, L.t.,” Soap mutters, running a hand through his hair. “Started distancing myself from everyone because of it, didn’t hurt that I was hardly ever in Scotland thanks to my job. It made everything easier to ignore, for both me and ‘em. But then, James saw us out together and it was the first time, since I came out, one of ‘em saw me with a man—”

Ghost coughs and the tips of Soap’s ears flush bright red.

“Not like *that*, Steamin’ Jesus.”

“I didn’t say anything,” Ghost grunts and fights the urge to bang his head into a wall. Or to jump out the window. Either option was looking pretty good right now.

Soap scrubs a hand across his face.

“Anyways,” he continues. “Mam barely let me get a word in before she was making me promise to drive down to Lanark. With my ‘boyfriend.’”

And that ‘boyfriend’ was Ghost.

“Listen, L.t.,” Soap says and he steps near Ghost carefully, like someone would step closer to a particularly sensitive trip mine. “I’m sorry for draggin’ you into this mess and you obviously dinnae have to do anything you don’t want to, but...”

Soap looks away, as if to hide his expression, but Ghost can still see the pinch between his brows and the uncharacteristic downward swoop of his usually smiling mouth.

“She’s never asked me about a guy before, not even during the few times we called when I was deployed,” Soap admits and, his voice, usually so tinged with gravel and coarse sand, has never sounded so delicate in Ghost’s ears, “I never thought she would.”

Though he doesn’t mean to, he rarely does when thoughts of his late family infiltrate his brain, he can’t help but picture his own mother.

What would she have thought about Soap and Ghost’s own twisting, squirming feelings for the man? Would she have asked to bring him home? Would she have liked John MacTavish as he was, with all his subtlety and strength of a loose canon?

*Shit.*

He was dangerously teetering on a precipice with these thoughts, the worst sort of hypothetical scenarios that make him yearn so much he thinks he might be sick. Ghost digs his nails into his palms and forces himself to *breathe*.

When he looks back at Soap, the other is looking back at him.

Ghost prides himself in being many things. Last he checked, stupid was definitely not one of them. Yet, somehow, he finds himself pinching the bridge of his nose and asking the impossible:

“When does your mum want us by?”

The smile that Soap shoots him is almost enough to atone for his moment of pure, utter idiocy.

They leave that evening.

Though there are plenty of trains that can take them to Lanark, Soap had been adamant about driving back to his hometown.

“That way we have a getaway car, L.t.” Soap explains as he loads Ghost’s duffel into the trunk of his car. His arms strain against the fabric of his sweater, almost obscenely, and Ghost looks away to keep himself from staring like a right creep. “Just like old times, eh?”

“Is your family gonna be shooting at us like the Shadows?” Ghost asks. “Because I’d rather not have a repeat of ‘old times.’ You barely made it out with your arm intact last time.”

The look that Soap shoots him is too pensive for Ghost’s tastes.

“I dinnae ken about literal guns, but there might be some verbal bullets shot, L.t.”

“Lovely.”

They slide into the car and Soap turns his keys in the ignition, the engine roaring to life. He looks at Ghost with a small smile playing on his lips.

“Don’t worry, I’ll protect you.”

Ghost almost laughs at that statement.

“I think you mean that *I’ll* protect *you*.”

He’s fully expecting Soap to argue with him to make his point, but the other only hums, pensively. He reaches out towards Ghost, and Ghost stiffens into a statue in his seat.

Instantly, because his brain is his own worst enemy, he’s reminded of their night from before. When they had drunkenly pulled each other into something close enough to be an embrace; Soap had wrapped his arms around Ghost’s neck like, for some reason, he had wanted Ghost like Ghost wanted him. They had been closer than they had ever been before and Ghost had, selfishly, wanted more.

For a split second, he had thought that Soap wanted it too and the thought had been terrifying.

He braces for Soap’s touch again, fighting the urge to squeeze his eyes shut.

Instead, Soap braces his hand on the back of Ghost’s headrest and begins reversing out of their parking space.

“We’ll protect each other,” Soap says to him. “Like we always do, eh?”

Ghost blinks, then promptly drops his head against his window with a thud.

“L.t.,” Soap asks. “You alright?”

“Never been better,” Ghost croaks out.

*Fucking Scottish air.*

Soon enough, the buildings and bustling street life of Glasgow fade behind them, and the scenery is replaced with forests. Trees scraping the pink and golden afternoon sky speed past Ghost’s window in a blur. He had heard glowing reviews of the beauty of Scotland, mostly from the man driving the car, and even he couldn’t deny how pretty it was then.

Still, Ghost's eyes keep drifting away from the scenery towards Soap.

He's a good driver, far better than Ghost, admittedly, who sped more often than not when he was behind the wheel, all sloppy turns and reckless lane shifts. Soap was much more careful. They could probably travel the world together with Soap in the driver's seat and Ghost beside him, crossing rivers and mountains until they could find a safe corner of the earth where they could rest at.

He and Soap on a road trip, one that wasn't driven by a life-or-death mission with one of them bleeding out from a bullet wound—the thought sounded like a dream.

"Staring," Soap calls out. His eyes don't leave the road in front of him. "Where's your head at, L.t.? Picturing something dirty?"

Ghost *hates* him.

"Picturing the look on Price's face when I tell him his best demolition expert was found dead from mysterious circumstances. I think he just might shed a tear."

Soap frowns. "Just one tear? Damn, I was hoping he would break out his good cigar for my death."

"Don't feel too bad. I think he'd only break that out if Gaz was KIA."

"Or if his other cigars were KIA."

"That too," Ghost watches the dapples of sunshine glow orange through the trees. "So, how do you want to do this?"

At Soap's confused noise, Ghost elaborates. "How do you want to do this..." he grimaces. "Hoax. Scheme. Mission?"

Soap chokes.

"Christ, L.t."

Ghost rolls his eyes. "Do you have something better to call it, Sergeant?"

"Pretend relationship?" Soap offers, dryly.

Ghost shrugs. "Fine," he acquiesces. "How do you want to pull this pretend relationship off?"

Soap hums, drumming his fingers along the wheel.

“Shouldn’t be too hard,” he says. “We just have to convince them that we’re in love.”

“Oh, is that all.”

Soap swats at his shoulder before returning back to the steering wheel. “We should probably have some rules. How do you feel about pet names?”

“I definitely feel something about them,” Ghost says.

“So...they’re okay?” At Ghost’s silence, Soap sighs. “C’mon, L.t., gimme somethin’ to work with here. My family isn’t gonna believe this haver if I just call you ‘L.t.’ the whole time.”

“Fine,” Ghost sighs, fighting the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose for the umpteenth time that day. “I don’t mind them.” He has a sinking feeling that he’s just made the biggest mistake of his life and the worry cements itself in his gut when he sees Soap’s responding smile.

“Pure dead brilliant,” he croons. “Just so you know, I like nicknames too, *gorgeous* .”

Ghost tries very hard not to choke on his own spit.

“How do you feel about holding hands?” Soap asks him, after a beat. “I’m okay with it.”

Ghost frowns out the window, trying to dull the thud of his heart in his chest. “It should be fine,” he says. “Just don’t yank me around like a fuckin’ dog.”

“Oi.”

“Sorry, I meant, don’t go yanking me around like you’re a fuckin’ dog and I’m holding your chain.”

“Dickheed,” Soap huffs, petulantly. “M’ not a mutt,”

“Down, lad,” Ghost murmurs and smirks at the sound of Soap sputtering in indignation. He glances over to watch the other. “Someone’s gonna have to put a collar on you, one of these days.”

“Haud yer wheest.”

Soap's cheeks are dusted with a nice shade of pink. *Christ, he's gorgeous.*

Ghost clears his throat.

"So, holding hands is good?" He asks.

"Sounding a bit nervous, L.t.," Soap says, his embarrassment somehow doing a complete 180 into pure glee within seconds. "I promise it's not rocket science."

"Piss off."

"Aw, don't be shy. Want to practice?" Soap cackles, like the little shit he is. He had clearly been messing around with the whole "practicing" comment, but...

"Sure," Ghost says, as casually as he can.

He drops his hand down on the console between them, palm facing up. At the sudden movement, Soap's attention is briefly pulled away from the road and his gaze lands on Ghost's hand.

"What—"

"You can drive with one hand, can't you?" Ghost asks, coolly, though his voice twists with a challenge.

Soap blinks and looks back at the road. "Sir, you don't mean—"

"Going back on your word?"

After a moment of hesitation and a quick glance back down at Ghost's open hand, Soap drops a hand from the wheel and interlaces his fingers with Ghost's.

Even though he was expecting it, Ghost almost jerks at the sudden feeling of warm skin. Soap's hand is callused enough that he can feel every ridge and mark through the thin material of his gloves. Though he rarely takes off his gloves, he's suddenly overcome with the urge to peel the fabric off so that he can feel Soap's palm on his bare palm.

Subconsciously, he traces his thumb back and forth along Soap's skin, marveling at the feeling of him.

"Oh," Soap says, so quietly that Ghost almost misses it through the sound of his own heartbeat in his ears.



“What?”

“N-nothing, L.t..”

Ghost raises a brow and looks back up at Soap’s face.

The other man isn’t looking at their interlocked hands, his face firmly set towards the road, but Ghost is intrigued.

“Tell me,” he says, but Soap shakes his head resolutely and purses his lips shut. It’s clear he’s not budging and, after a few more tries, Ghost lays the matter to rest for now.

It’s also a little hard to focus on anything when Soap’s hand, warm and unreal, is on top of his. Suddenly, he’s immensely glad that Soap’s the one driving the car, because if Ghost were behind the steering wheel, he thinks they would have crashed into a tree the minute his and Soap’s hands slid together.

What a way to go out.

For the next few minutes, they go back and forth with other suggestions (vetoing some, agreeing to others) before they finally land on what they’ve been building up towards.

“Kissing?” Soap asks, casually, though Ghost hears the way his voice trails off at the end of the word.

*Fucking hell.*

Did he want to kiss Soap? God, there was nothing Ghost wanted *more*.

He dreamt of those lips, gorgeous and lethal in the way they curved, and of kissing them until they were bruised. Maybe if he were a different man, he would balk at the fact that if they did kiss, it would be under a false pretense; a stolen gift that was actually meant for good men who Soap would do taxes and grow old with, not a breathing corpse like Ghost.

But dying men have little to be picky about.

Ghost swallows.

“I’m fine with it,” he says. Because it’s not real, it’s just practice, just a farce. “Just, let me know before you go ‘round snoggin’ me.”

Soap is silent for a nauseating beat, before slowly agreeing. “Me too,”

he murmurs. "Kissing is fine with me."

*Christ.*

"Okay," he whispers, rough and quiet as the air leaves his lungs. He can see Soap's adam's apple bob. "Where are you alright with me kissing?"

"Steamin' Jesus," Soap wheezes. His face is bright red at this point, but Ghost would be a hypocrite to point it out. His own face feels uncomfortably hot under his balaclava. Still, he ignores it to watch Soap. "Uh, you know what, does it really matter? I mean, we're not going to be winchin' in front of my parents or anything—"

"Sergeant," he continues, and his voice is so raspy with want, he barely recognizes it in his own ears. "Answer the question."

"Christ, L.t."

"Johnny," his name is a command pouring from Ghost's lips, and Soap shifts in his seat at it. He gnaws on his lip, worrying the pink flesh between his teeth, and Ghost physically has to *dig* his nails into his thigh from reaching out and placing his thumb between those lips.

"My neck," Soap admits, voice shaky. "My face."

"Anywhere on your face?"

Soap swallows.

"Anywhere, Simon."

"Where else?"

"My hands," Soap licks his lips, eyes darting back to Ghost. Ghost looks steadily back at him.

"That right?"

"Aye," Soap breathes out. He starts when Ghost brings their still interlaced hands, from where they're resting on the console, up to his face. "What are you—"

Pulling his balaclava down enough that the lower half of his face is exposed, Ghost leans in and presses his lips to the back of Soap's hand.

His skin is warm under Ghost's mouth, tendons shifting in surprise. He smells like gunpowder and something so inherently *Soap*, Ghost wants to drown in it. It's fucking maddening.

The car almost veers off the path.

With a yelp, Soap rips his hand free from Ghost's hold and straightens the wheel. Ghost tries not to glare at the offending road like it's his new mortal enemy. He misses the weight of Soap's hand on his own hand and lips immediately.

*Come back*, he thinks blearily, eyeing the ridges of knuckles that are almost white from how tight Soap is holding the wheel. *Come back*.

"Simon," Soap splutters. "What the *fuck*."

"Hm?" Ghost pulls his balaclava down to stop Soap from seeing the ruddy blush on his cheeks. "Did you not say your hand was okay?"

"I hate you," Soap mutters. "Warn a guy next time."

Ghost licks his lips, chasing after the taste of Soap's skin on his tongue. *It's not real*, he reminds himself. *It's not real, it's not yours to keep, it's not yours to lose*.

It does little to stop him from wanting another bite.

"Roger, Johnny."

They arrive at town at the cusp of nightfall.

As they drive through quaint streets lined with stores, Soap grows quiet. It's a stark contrast to how he was so full of life when they first arrived in Glasgow, pointing out certain restaurants and shops and blabbering on with personal anecdotes about them.

If Ghost didn't know better, he would have thought Soap was a stranger here.

Eventually, they pull up next to a pretty red brick house and Soap turns the engine off. He sighs, not even sparing a glance at his childhood home, instead choosing to look directly at Ghost instead.

"Hope you don't mind that we're staying 'ere," he says. "I wanted to get a hotel but my mam probably would've strung me up if I did."

"It's all good," Ghost says.

Soap smiles, but it's a weak imitation of one of his real ones.

"You ready, gorgeous?"

Ghost rolls his eyes, though the nickname sends shivers down his spine.

"If you are, *love*," he responds and watches in delight as Soap blinks at him in shock.

It was almost funny how flustered he got when Ghost met him on his level—no matter how often the other did it, Soap would always end up so surprised.

"Uh," Soap rubs a hand over his face, seeming to collect his bearings. "Before we head in, should we come up with some code word?"

"Code word?"

Soap shrugs. "If you don't like somethin' I'm doing, I want to know, L.t. It would be smart for us to have a word that means '*stop*.'"

Ghost gnaws the inside of his cheek.

"You think I'm gonna hurt you, Johnny?" he asks.

"I'm more afraid that I'm gonna hurt you," Soap admits and Ghost wants to laugh at it. He has no doubt in his mind that Soap can make him bleed, but in the same breath, he thinks that he might enjoy every second of it. At the mercy of Soap, he could fall in love with the jagged edges of cruelty.

But Soap, for all his stained hands, will never be Simon's father or Rouba.

So Ghost takes this form of foreign luxury and tucks it close to his chest, like the best form of chest candy in the world.

"Okay," he nods. "We need somethin' obvious to us but not to your family. Any of them current or ex-military?"

"Affirmative," Soap nods. "My dad served for a wee bit. Navy."

Damn. Ghost had been about to suggest that they use military slang as their codeword, but that was out the window. Maybe it was for the better, it probably would have sounded strange if he or Soap randomly shouted out "hangfire" or "alpha charlie" during a family dinner.

"Call me John," Soap says, suddenly. "You never really call me that anyways, unless you're right pissed, eh?"

Ghost huffs out, amused. Fair, enough.

"Then what's your code word?"

Soap frowns. "L.t., I don't think I nee—" he falls silent at Ghost's glare.

"Fine," he sighs. "I'll call you...uh, sweetheart if I want you to stop doin' something."

"Sweetheart?" Ghost asks, his face flushing hot. "Johnny, what the bleedin' hell."

"What?" Soap asks, defensive, though he also seems flustered. "You gotta admit it's a good one. Slick. Nobody'll suspect a thing."

Ghost wants to bang his forehead into the window.

"Fine," he breathes out. "You better fuckin' use it when you need to. M' serious."

"You too," Soap turns his attention fully on him. "I mean it, Simon."

Ghost nods, because there's little else he can do under the weight of Soap's laser-eyed stare.

Eventually, they get their things and head up to the front door. Before Soap can ring the doorbell, Ghost puts a hand on his shoulder. Soap turns to him, questioning.

When he sees Ghost tugging at the bottom of his balaclava, his eyes widen.

"Hey," he mutters, quietly. "You don't have to do that."

Ghost exhales.

"I know," he says. "But I want to."

Even as his words leave his mouth, he doesn't know if they're true. His relationship with his mask is far more complicated than his relationship with most humans. Sometimes he needs it like he needs air, sometimes it's simply a flimsy piece of cloth he wears for the hell of it.

Nonetheless, he hooks his fingers under the material and pulls it off.

The air is cool against his cheeks and it soothes the itchy skin pulling around his Glasgow scars. Ghost runs a hand through his hair, smoothing it down in an attempt to look presentable, and glances at Soap.

Soap looks up at him, face unreadable.

"What?" Ghost asks.

Soap wets his lips with his tongue and Ghost's stomach tightens as he follows the motion.

"That never grows old," Soap responds. Ghost blinks.

"What?" he asks again, dumbly.

Soap smiles.

"Don't worry your pretty head about it, Simon."

And with that, he rings the doorbell.

## Chapter End Notes

i love taking hardened war criminals and forcing them into unserious corny tropes like this gawd damn

# sit here, lie there

## Chapter Notes

soap's family gets introduced in this chapter and there are quite a few names so please look at the end notes for any clarification if you're confused. also..this fic may end up being a slower burn than i intended. in my defense, your honor, i tend to overwrite.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Soap barely has the chance to lower his hand before the door swing opens, and suddenly, a woman is pulling him into a bear hug.

"John," she cries out, manhandling a trained soldier with the ease unexpected from a five-foot-something, fifty-year-old woman in a bright green apron. Soap lets out a choked sound, though Ghost isn't sure if it's from emotions or because of a pair of arms strangling his neck, and he unfurls into the embrace.

"Maw," he murmurs back, as she eventually pulls away enough to cup his face in her hands and yank him down to her eye level.

"You've gotten so skinny," she says, her voice thick with Soap's ever-so-familiar Scottish drawl. "What are they feeding you over there, wee yin?"

"Maw," Soap sighs and bats at her hands, though she still holds on tight. "Dinnae call me that. Also, work keeps me healthy and in shape. Tell her, gorgeous."

Ghost blinks.

"Uh," he clears his throat. "Yes. Very healthy and fit."

Mrs. MacTavish looks over her son's shoulder and Ghost tenses. He can see traces of Soap all over her features, from the shape of her eyes to her thick brows, and it's strange, to say the least. She smiles tentatively at him, but he can see the way she hesitates.

"You must be John's boyfriend."

Ghost swallows.

“Yes, miss,” he says, and tries not to punch himself in the face for it.

*Miss?* Was he back in secondary school? Soap makes another choked sort of noise, but this time, Ghost doesn’t even have to be looking at the other to know that it’s stifled laughter.

*Little shit.*

He tries *hard* not to glare in Soap’s direction

Mrs. MacTavish’s smile broadens, if only for a bit, but her eyes remain wary. “None of that. Call me Lorraine.”

“Yes, miss, er, I mean, Lorraine.”

Soap lets out another choked sound and Ghost is this close to jumping back in the car and gunning it out of Lanark (and Scotland altogether), when the door pushes open again.

Another figure steps through, much taller and broader than Lorraine.

“Dad,” Soap says to the stranger, before he’s wrapped up in another embrace, if not slightly briefer and rougher than his hug with his mother. As the two thump each other on the back, Ghost tries to tear his eyes away from Mr. MacTavish, but it’s near impossible.

If he had thought Soap looked similar to his mother, the resemblance between him and his father is uncanny. Looking at David MacTavish, with his crowfeet lining his lively eyes and a grin that skewed a little too far to the right, was like looking at Soap through a funhouse mirror. Warped in some areas, realistic in others, and disorientating altogether.

The duo pulls apart and Mr. MacTavish claps a hand over his son’s shoulder.

“You’re practically a stick, John.”

“That’s what I said,” Lorraine says to her husband, matter-of-factly.

Soap groans and wiggles away from his father, sidling next to Ghost in one smooth motion.

Ghost sees it coming, but he can’t help but start when he feels a hand grasping his. He glances at Soap, but the other doesn’t look back, instead looking resolutely at his parents like he was about to match into battle with only a dull knife in his arsenal, and they were waiting



on the other side.

“Maw, Dad,” he announces, somehow both proud and nervous all at once. “This is Simon Riley, callsign Ghost. He’s my boyfriend.”

*Bloody fucking hell.*

Ghost doesn’t exactly shiver at the words, but it’s a near thing.

Soap’s parents focus their attention on him, and Ghost straightens.

“Thank you for having me in your home,” he says, trying to speak past the lump suddenly clogging up his throat. “It’s lovely to meet you both.”

Lorraine opens her mouth, as if to reply, but a loud crash from inside causes all of them to flinch.

Soap frowns, stiffening. “Maw,” he says, letting go of Ghost’s hand. “What was that?”

He had told Ghost on the drive that his parents lived alone, now that he and his two sisters (and Ghost had finally been privy to the knowledge that Soap was a middle child) had all moved out.

With his oldest sister living in the next town over with her husband and children and his youngest sister attending the University of Aberdeen, Soap had been positive that their farce as a couple would be for his parents’ eyes only.

*“We only have to fool the two of ‘em,”* he had assured Ghost, emphatically. *“It’ll be easier than any military drill, L.t.”*

Before either of them can respond to Soap’s question, the door flies open for the third time, and Ghost makes out what looks like two women and a couple of children filling up the doorway. Then, a cacophony of voices begins pouring out like a flood.

“John!”

“Uncle John!”

“Who’s that, Uncle John?”

“Hell’s fucking bells, is that the boyfriend?”

*“Fuck,”* Soap breathes out, and Ghost very much agrees with the

sentiment.

A few minutes later, Ghost finds himself seated in a sitting room, on a rather lumpy cushion, desperately wondering how he got...here.

Here being his comrade, his brother-in-arms' childhood home in Lanark, Scotland, pretending to be said brothers-in-arms' boyfriend, and surrounded by his family.

"Why are you *here*," Soap asks his sisters for the umpteenth time that night. "Both of you live out of town."

"Thought it would be nice to take the weans to visit their Granny and Grandpa," Rebecca, Soap's older sister, says, casually.

"Uni break," Sarah, Soap's younger sister responds, at the same time.

"What a coincidence," Soap mutters, with narrowed eyes.

His sisters shrug in unison.

"Here," Lorraine MacTavish appears before Ghost with a mug. She places it gently into his hands and nods at him. "Thought you might like a cup of tea."

"Ah," Ghost says. "Thank you."

"Jesus," Sarah exclaims. "John, I cannae believe you went and got with a Brit."

Soap stiffens from where he's sitting next to him.

Ironically enough, they've been all but shoved together on the loveseat as the rest of Soap's family staked their claim on the other furniture in the sitting room. He and Soap are surrounded like this, defenseless, with Soap's family staring them down. A pack of wolves waiting for a pair of wounded gazelle to finally trip.

Christ, he wishes he had his mask on right now. His Glasgow smile scars itch something awful.

"Your callsign is Ghost, eh?" Sarah continues, her gaze shifting fully

onto Ghost.

She's six years younger than her brother, and they share the same strong nose and blunt demeanor. When Ghost had first gone to shake her hand, she had stared up at him and said, very matter-of-factly: "You look like you can toss people around."

"Thank you?"

"Can you toss my brother around?"

"Um."

Soap had all but shoved his little sister away, flushing red from his neck to his forehead. Ghost could do nothing but cough.

He had gotten the uncanny feeling that Sarah, already, wasn't a big fan of his.

Ghost nods and takes a sip from his mug.

"Oh!" Soap's older sister, Rebecca, interjects this time and sits straight in her seat. She looks the most different from her siblings, with her dirty blond hair and softer outlines, but the spark in her eyes is uncanny. "Wait, you're not *the* Ghost, are you?"

"Shut yer puss," Soap hisses at her. "Rebecca, no—"

*The Ghost?*

Ghost lifts his mug from his lips. "How do you mean?"

"Oh, he is," Rebecca laughs in delight. The sound of joy is so much like Soap's usual bark of laughter, though higher in pitch, it sends Ghost's already muddled brain reeling. "John, you dog."

"I told you it's not *like* that," Soap snarls, and when Ghost glances at him, his face is a bright pink flush. Soap must feel his eyes, but he refuses to look back, instead choosing to stare daggers at his family. "I'm gonna kill you."

Ghost has seen Soap commit murder with nothing but his bare hands, but Rebecca only waves a dismissive hand in her little brother's direction at the threat.

"You love the twins too much to leave them without a mam."

“Stop using my niece and nephew as a shield, ye coward,” Soap grumbles, leaning back in the loveseat and crossing his arms like a petulant child.

“They’re *my* children.”

The aforementioned twins, Rebecca’s five-year-olds, are watching some cartoon on the TV, apparently bored of the conversation around them. Maisie, the girl, laughs heartily at something that happens on screen while her brother Blake bites back his own giggles. Every so often though, one of them glances back at Ghost, and then promptly whips their head back around when he meets their eye.

He tries not to look at them too much. His nerves are already teetering too close to the edge, and the presence of children would do very little to bring him back to the right side.

*A little boy curled up like a comma on the floor, hands still twitching, eyes wide open and unseeing.*

Ghost’s chest aches.

“You been talking about me, Johnny?” He asks Soap under his breath, because he needs to say...something, or else he might float away in a sea of his own thoughts and maroon-drenched memories. “M’ touched.”

Soap frowns at him.

“Only mentioned you once or twice, don’t get a big head. Besides, you’re supposed to be on my side,” he complains. “We’re a team.”

“Don’t remember agreeing to be on a team with you.”

“Oh, you traitor,” Soap shoves at him, though his push is light. His palm smacks against Ghost’s shoulder and lingers there. “I should’ve crashed the car.”

After a beat, Ghost finds himself reaching up to interlace Soap’s hand with his. Soap gives the tiniest nod of approval; conscious of their audience. Ghost nods back.

“Yeah?” He asks, squeezing Soap’s fingers. The feeling of them, strong but so easily breakable, soothes the ache in him somewhat. He holds his hand tighter, careful not to crush it, careful not to let Soap slip away. “Didn’t know you wanted to die with me that badly, love.”

Soap blushes a bright pink, but doesn't look away from Ghost's gaze.

"That's what you do for teammates," he says. "Try it out sometime, gorgeous."

"Rather not have you dying on me, period," Ghost admits.

Soap makes a little *aha!* noise and grins brilliantly.

"So you do like me," he smirks. "Never thought I'd see the day you finally admitted it."

"I like you alive, I told you before."

"Hm. You know what I think?" Soap leans forward as if to whisper a secret in Ghost's ear. Ghost, in turn, draws in closer because he's nothing if not a piece of metal drawn to the magnet that is John MacTavish.

"What?" He manages to murmur back.

Soap's eyes burn bright.

"I think you're a liar."

*This isn't real, this isn't real, this isn't—*

Soap's stare holds onto his, before it slides away, ensnared by something else. Chasing after brimstone and flames, Ghost follows his gaze too.

Soap's parents, Lorraine and David, watch their son, and they look... somewhere between interested and confused, like Soap was a puzzle they had just realized they were putting together wrong. Soap looks back at them, his expression unreadable, but Ghost knows he's seeing all that and more on his parents' faces.

Rebecca clears her throat.

"Well," she declares, a little too loudly. "I should probably get these two to bed."

Soap's older sister shuts the tv off and begins ushering her children off the couch, much to their sleepy disdain.

"Maw, I want," Maisie slurs, her eyes drooping shut. "I want Uncle John to tuck me in."

That breaks Soap's staredown with his parents and he grins fondly at his niece. "Sick of your mam's bedtime stories, Maisie?" he croons, understandingly. "You poor lass."

"Stop talkin' keech," Rebecca replies, easily.

"Not talkin' keech if it's the truth, eh?" Soap stands and reaches down to pat his niece's head. "Want me to tuck you in too, Blake?" He asks his nephew this time.

Blake shakes his head and hugs his mother's leg.

Ghost bites back a grin.

"So there is someone your charms don't work on, Johnny," he says. "A bloody miracle."

Soap rolls his eyes.

"Yeah, yeah, laugh it up, beautiful," he says to Ghost, leaning down to sweep Maisie into his arms. She giggles and clings to his jumper, as he straightens back to his full height. Soap's grin has never been more beautiful. "You just admitted that 'my charms' worked on *you*."

'*Oh, you have no idea,*' Ghost wants to say.

After the appropriate goodnight pleasantries and tucking in for the children, he and Soap find themselves in Soap's bedroom.

Ghost was in Soap's *childhood bedroom*.

Where Soap had slept in, did his homework in, grew up in—before he went by Soap, before he chose a life of violence and vitriol. It was almost surreal.

He tries not to gawk, but it's a near thing.

His old room is neat and tidy, a byproduct of Soap's absence, yet still, hints of his personality peek out everywhere. A few posters here and there on the wall, an odd picture of Soap grinning with unfamiliar faces tacked up beside them. Trophies, Ghost would bet his best knives that they were all football related, line his shelves and a record

player sits on his otherwise barren desk.

Ghost jerks a finger at the record player.

“Never took you for a pretentious prat.”

“Wow,” Soap smirks. “That’s a harsh thing to say to your boyfriend, L.t.”

*Right. They were back to L.t.*

After a day of being called nicknames like gorgeous and beautiful, the sudden change was like a bucket of ice water to the face. Ghost clears his throat and looks away.

“Good thing I’m not seeing any boyfriends here, then.”

There’s a pause.

“Right,” Soap mutters. For a moment, he almost sounds...agitated about something, but when Ghost glances back at him, the other man is all cool smiles and teasing eyes.

“I’m not a ‘pretentious prat,’” he affects a horrible British accent at those words, “for having a record player. Some would say it’s cultured of me. Romantic even.”

“And others would say it’s pretentious of you.”

Soap rolls his eyes and turns to unpack his bag. “Awa’ an bile yer heid. One day, I’ll serenade someone with it and he’ll love it. You’ll see.”

“I’ll send the poor sod my condolences,” Ghost responds. “He obviously has brain damage.”

A rock settles into the pit of his stomach at the thought of another man in his place. Standing where Ghost was. Cracking jokes with Soap like Ghost was. Only this time, it would be real.

Real enough that this man would be allowed to push Soap down onto the bed, straddle those hips of his, and lean down to—

*The bed.*

“Oh, fuckin’ hell,” Ghost breathes out.

Soap looks at him, a question in his eyes.

“Johnny,” Ghost says, as calmly as he can. “There’s only one bed.”

Soap frowns.

“Uh, yeah? We talked about this on the car ride, L.t. You can sleep in my bed and I can sleep in,” Soap’s face pales, “in the guest room—”

“—that your older sister Rebecca is currently sleeping in?” Ghost asks. “That fuckin’ guest room?”

“Fuck,” Soap says, eloquently. “We didn’t know she would be here... Maisie and Blake are staying in Rebecca’s old room, Sarah’s in her room, Rebecca’s in the only spare room... *Shit, L.t.*”

Ghost wants to strangle someone.

Soap must see the murderous intent in his eyes because he quickly raises his hands in a placating gesture.

“There’s a simple solution to all of this, eh?”

“Enlighten me,” Ghost manages. “Please.”

“You take the bed,” Soap gestures to the bed, and then the hardwood floor next to it, “and I’ll take the floor.”

“No,” Ghost says, barely letting Soap finish his sentence.

"Hell's fuckin' bells," Soap lets out an agitated breath, “then what do you propose, sir?”

“You take the bed, I’ll take the floor.”

Soap’s outraged squawk should be funny in any other circumstance, but Ghost can’t really find the humor in this situation. “No way,” Soap says, just as strongly as Ghost had. “I’m not letting you sleep on the floor.”

Ghost raises a brow, though Soap can’t see it, since he’s got his balaclava back snugly on his face.

“You’re *letting* me do things now, Sergeant?”

“Oh, stuff it, L.t.,” Soap snaps, his brows furrowed in agitation. “You’re my guest. Maw would skin me alive if I made you sleep on the



floor.”

“She wouldn’t skin you alive because *she wouldn’t know*.”

“Still.”

Ghost pinches the bridge of his nose, fighting off a migraine. “I’ve slept on the floor before,” he says because he’s grasping for straws at this point.

“You think I haven’t? We’re *both* in the military.”

Ghost frowns. He wants to tell Soap that it’s *fine*, that Soap’s floor is the furthest thing from the worst place Ghost would have slept.

“Johnny,” he says, as emphatically as he can. “I’ve had worse. I can —”

Soap glares at him, and the fire in his frown is enough to send Ghost’s mouth snapping shut.

“I dinnae care if you slept in Annie’s room before and lived to tell the tale, for Christ’s sake. You deserve a fuckin’ bed, Simon. You, of all people, deserve—”

Soap cuts himself off and drops his gaze.

Oh.

Ghost blinks.

He doesn’t know what to say that or to the lump of emotions he thought were long dead rising in his throat.

Soap turns away, his neck red, and goes to pick up his empty travel bag. “I’m gonna, uh,” he murmurs, and gestures in the general direction of the door. “Yeah.”

“Okay,” Ghost rasps.

When Soap leaves, presumably to shower or throw himself out of a window (Ghost wouldn’t fault him for whatever he chose), Ghost’s left staring at the empty bed in front of him. It’s relatively big, large enough to comfortably fit a grown man.

Barely enough to fit two.

His own childhood bed had been a tiny thing, a space Ghost had

outgrown physically and mentally before he even hit fifteen. For most of his youth, he had found himself sleeping more on the floor than on that bed. The comfort of the ground was something familiar.

Yet, somehow, his eyes keep getting drawn back to Soap's bed.

*"You, of all, people deserve—"*

Soap's words ring in his ears, echoing like Ghost's brain was an echo chamber and Soap had leaned in and shouted directly into it.

*"Deserve."*

What did Ghost deserve other than a nameless grave and a couple of bullets in his chest?

When Soap stumbles into the room, his hair still damp from a shower, Ghost doesn't look at him or at the droplet that makes its way down his temple. He simply leaves and takes his own shower.

As he scrubs away the day's grime, he thinks of two empty beds; one in Manchester, the other right here, at the tips of his fingers.

"Sleep with me," Ghost announces, stepping back into Soap's bedroom.

Soap wheezes.

"I'm sorry?" He coughs out.

Ghost grumbles, cheeks flushing hot. "I meant: Sleep in the bed with me," he corrects, as coldly as he can, though it's probably dampened by his flustered state. He yanks his balaclava back on. "For someone always accusing me of having dirty thoughts, you're no different."

"L.t.," Soap whines, though he still looks like he's been hit with a baseball bat. "That's not fair. You're the one barging in 'ere demanding that I *sleep* with you. What's a lad to think?"

*Well, when he put it that way.*

"Payback's a bitch, ain't it," Ghost responds, shortly. "Call it

compensation for this morning.”

Soap mutters something unintelligible and turns back to the bed. “Can we both fit?” He stands and eyes his bed, dubiously. “Last time I shared this bed, I was a skinny malinky longlegs, I was.”

“A what,” Ghost scrubs a hand over his face, “Never mind, I don’t want to know.”

“Sensing a lot of hostility here,” Soap pouts, then gestures at the bed. “I’m saying that the last time I slept here with someone, I was younger and slighter. Also, the person I shared it with wasn’t exactly—”

He’s sly about it, but Ghost still feels Soap’s eyes skating down the length of his body.

“Wasn’t what?”

“Uh,” Soap rubs the back of his neck. “That person wasn’t quite your...build, L.t.”

“What’s that mean.”

“Just means you’re, er, tall,” Soap sputters. “Very tall.”

Ghost steps in closer.

“Yeah? What else?” He asks, just to see his sergeant squirm.

Soap inches back, eyes wide with alarm. “Uh,” he swallows and Ghost watches his throat bob. “You also have big shoulders?”

Ghost can’t tamp down his smile at that, and he can feel it stretch his Glasgow scars wide.

“Going on about my shoulders again, Johnny,” he says. “Bit of a weird obsession you’ve been developing.”

Soap blinks before scowling up at him.

“*Once*. I mentioned them once, you lavvy-headed wankstain,” he mutters. “That means you’re a toilet-headed cumsplat, sir.”

“You say the sweetest things to me,” Ghost deadpans, then he gestures back to the bed. “We can fit.”

Soap frowns like he doesn’t agree.

Ghost shrugs. "If you don't think so, I can always sleep on the ground. Don't want to suffocate you with my 'big' shoulders."

"You're a bastard, L.t.," the other sighs and folds his arms. "Fine, let's sleep on the bed together. Dinnae blame me if I kick you off in the middle of the night."

They do fit.

Soap's curled up against the wall and Ghost is half-dangled off the edge, but they fit. There's also a few inches of space between their bodies, so Ghost would chalk it up to a win if he was less self-aware.

Neither of them says anything though. It's hard to breathe normally while this close to Soap, much less bicker with the other, so Ghost keeps his mouth shut and stares up at the ceiling. Soap doesn't even joke about how Ghost is sleeping with his mask on.

The silence stretches, for another minute, for an hour.

"Johnny," he says when he can't take the silence any longer.

"Hm?"

"About what you said earlier," Though they're not touching, they're so close that Ghost can feel the way the other man tenses at his words, "Uh, what's Annie's room?"

"What?" Soap asks, voice unreadable.

"You said you didn't care if I slept in Annie's room before. What's that?"

"Oh," Soap relaxes, somewhat. "It's an urban legend around Scotland."

"Really."

"Yeah, L.t. It's real creepy."

"Tell me," Ghost whispers. "Tell me the story."

“Okay,” Soap murmurs back, without hesitation. “So, once upon a time—Oi, quit smirking, L.t., I can practically hear you grinning from here.”

Their shoulders brush, jostled together by either Ghost’s huff of amusement or Soap’s overdramatic sigh, Ghost doesn’t know. All he knows is that Soap is warm, his bed is warm. Neither of them pulls away.

“Never grinned once in my life,” he lies. “Continue.”

“Hm. So, a psychic came to visit Scotland in the early 90s, and she went to the Real Mary King’s Close because there were rumors that a ghost lived there.”

“Where’s that?” Ghost murmurs.

“Edinburgh. The Close is basically a series of underground tunnels there. Cool, right, L.t.?”

Soap shifts closer and Ghost doesn’t have the willpower to scoot back. He hums, noncommittally, and Soap takes it as a sign to continue.

“This psychic made contact with the spirit that lived in the Close, this wee lass named Annie. She lived there when the bubonic plague was real bad.”

Soap smells good, some strange mixture of ginger and gunpowder that shouldn’t work, but somehow does. Somehow *he* works, and Christ, Ghost wants to unravel him at the seams. He barely manages to keep himself from leaning forward and sniffing Soap’s hair like a mutt.

“Apparently, wee Annie was left behind to die by her mam when she was exhibiting signs of the bubonic plague. Isn’t that,” Soap yawns, “uh, isn’t that shitty?”

“Very shitty.”

“I wouldn’t leave Maisie or Blake behind if they had the plague. Maybe Sarah or Rebecca, but not them.”

“You’re stone-cold,” Ghost says, lightly.

“But also a great uncle. Anyways, Annie’s spirit was sad because she lost her doll. So, the psychic comforted her by leaving behind a doll in the room she haunted,” Soap yawns again and his words slur together.

“Now, people go and leave dolls there all the time and she’s said to play with them every night.”

“Huh,” Ghost says. “That’s surprisingly...sweet.”

“Dinnae ken what’s sweet about ghosts and wee creepy dolls.”

Ghost raises a brow. He wants to turn on his side to look at Soap, to see what expression he’s making too. But he can’t. He won’t.

“Have you gone?”

Soap hums. “Where?” His voice is barely above a gravelly whisper.

“Annie’s room.”

“Aye, when I was young, with my sisters. Rebecca threatened to leave me there for the night, so I bit her. Then, Sarah cried so loud some tourists thought that it was wee Annie’s wailing.”

Ghost can almost see it now: Soap as a kid, in a dark, haunted tunnel full of dolls, chomping down on his sister’s arm, while their youngest sister shouted her head off. A couple of brave tourists nearby almost fainting at the sound of sobs and screams. *What a sight.*

Soap shifts, and Ghost can hear him exhale, slowly.

“Besides that, though, Annie’s room doesn’t sound awful,” Ghost says.

“Sure,” Soap breathes out, “but still, with all those creepy dolls staring at you, I wouldn’t want to take a nap there, eh?”

Ghost hears, more than he sees, when Soap falls asleep. His breath evens out and his body relaxes, slumping closer to Ghost. Their fingertips brush.

“Yeah,” Ghost rasps, his heart pounding too loud in the silence of the night. “I wouldn’t either.”

## Chapter End Notes

Quick recap of the MacTavish family:

David: Soap’s father

Lorraine: Soap’s mother

Rebecca (33): Soap’s older sister by 6 years

John (27): the Soap himself.

Sarah (21): Soap's younger sister by 6 years

Maisie (5): Rebecca's daughter/Soap's niece

Blake (5): Rebecca's son/Soap's nephew

# morning light

## Chapter Notes

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See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

There are two things Ghost realizes when he wakes.

One: He's wearing his balaclava.

Despite any jokes and quips, he's exchanged with Soap, he doesn't usually sleep with it on. The fabric is heavy on his skin, scratching against his cheeks and pulling taut around the bridge of his nose. It's enough to send him gasping for air, if only for a split second.

Two: There's an unfamiliar weight around his waist.

The second is cause for greater concern.

He thrashes, ready to grab a knife, a gun, anything, and slash through the chain around him. It's been a long time since he had woken to something foreign crushing him alive, but instinct moves his muscles so his brain doesn't have to.

His hand flails forward, grabbing for his knife in his bedside drawer, and his fingers close around...Nothing.

Ghost freezes and blinks the sleep from his eyes.

Right where his bedside table should be is nothing, just empty air.

It's only then that he realizes that he's not in his shitty cot, back at the 141 base. He's not on the cold floor of Roba's cell, and certainly not back in Manchester, curled up in the moth-eaten carpet of his



childhood bedroom. He's somewhere else entirely, in a bed that's too warm and covered in more duvets than he's ever owned in his life.

He's in Soap's childhood bedroom.

He blinks down at the weight around his waist.

It's an arm.

All at once, too many emotions flood Ghost's brain at the arm around his waist: Panic, horror, surprise, something so close to longing that it sends another bout of terror rushing through him. A sigh, soft and sleepy, comes out from behind him and it sends the flood in Ghost's brain to a complete halt.

Slowly, he turns his head as much as he can, without dislocating his neck.

Soap lays beside him, curled up on his side.

His hair falls messily over his forehead, dark strands of his overgrown mohawk sticking up every which way. His eyelashes—God, his eyelashes are long—flutter against the dark circles underneath his eyes. The scar that cuts through his eyebrow looks softer in the morning light, less sharp and ragged, almost like a slash of graphite rather than an old wound.

He's...

Soap murmurs something sleepily and burrows in closer, his arm tightening around Ghost's waist.

Somehow, when Ghost had managed to fall into his own fitful bout of sleep, they must have ended up like this; with Ghost on his side and Soap curled up behind him, Soap's arm thrown casually around his midsection and his forehead mere inches away from the vulnerable spot between Ghost's shoulder blades.

They aren't touching anywhere else—like somehow even in sleep, Soap knew what would be too much—but the pressure of his arm nearly drowns Ghost alive. He wants to cut it off completely, he wants to wear Soap's arm around him like the world's strangest harness. He wants to sink back against it and close his eyes for the final time.

He wants—

A thud interrupts his thoughts,

Somewhere downstairs, someone turns on a coffee machine. One of Soap's family members.

*Their farce.*

Ghost rubs at his tired eyes. He's going insane.

Carefully, he peels Soap's arm off of him and slides out into the cold air of Soap's bedroom. Soap's brow furrows in his sleep and Ghost resists the urge to smooth it out with his thumb. He tiptoes away to get ready.

As he pulls off his mask and runs a hand through his hair, he keeps his eyes firmly on Soap's bedroom door and not on the bed behind him.

Ghost has, on many occasions, been told that he had terrible coping mechanisms.

Of course, most of the people who told him this was military men and women who devoted their lives to killing and warfare, so he always took their admonishments with a grain of salt. But, even so, he had to admit to himself that there was only so much drinking, smoking, and stabbing he could do before his body gave out entirely.

Maybe that's why he took up running.

He had never been the biggest fan of running drills, but when he started up his tradition of morning jogs, he had found some sort of... peace in it. With the blood pumping in his ears and the adrenaline rushing through his body, he could barely think of anything else. It was almost...simple.

He needs simplicity now, more than ever.

As he toes on his shoes and heads for the front door, however, a voice stops him in his tracks.

"Ghost?"

Ghost turns, dread pooling in his stomach.

Soap's father, David MacTavish, stands behind him.

The other night, Ghost had drawn the conclusion that he and Soap were nearly identical, just set apart by their ages. However, in the morning light, he realizes that that assumption wasn't all that true.

The bridge of David's nose is crooked, whereas Soap's is straight. Soap's eyebrows are dark and thick, expressive in their own right, whereas David's are two flat lines. Perhaps the biggest difference between the two, however, is the way they look at Ghost now.

David looks at him with eyes like a frozen lake, impenetrable and chilling to the bone. Soap looks at him...Well, Ghost has never thought of Soap as someone *soft*, but his eyes have never taken on that frost before.

At least, never while looking at Ghost.

For some reason, that knowledge sits heavy in Ghost's gut, like an 80-pound boulder.

"Sir," he says with a nod. "I was just about to go for a run."

David's eyebrows arch. "So was I," he says and gestures to the workout clothes he's donning. "Want to go together?"

There was little Ghost wanted *less*, but he plasters on a slight smile and agrees.

They take a lap around the neighborhood together, passing by picturesque houses lined with trees and fence posts. It's dizzying to think that Soap grew up here, that he rode a bike past these houses every day for eighteen years, and that he probably knew every person who lived in those homes.

He had been quiet when they first arrived in town, barely sparing a second glance at the shops and houses they drove past. Was that apathy something new, or was it something cultivated over years of living in a tiny, Roman Catholic town as a gay man? Ghost wonders and wonders.

They go at a much slower pace than usual, seeing as how Ghost's running companion has two decades on him.

“Ghost,” David MacTavish says, breaking the silence.

“Sir,” he responds.

“How are you liking Scotland?”

“It’s beautiful,” Ghost says. “Johnny’s been talking my ear off about it forever. I can see why.”

David lets out a huff of air that sounds more like an exhale, rather than a laugh. “I still cannae believe he lets you call him ‘Johnny,’” the man muses. “Never thought I’d live to see the day that lad didn’t bash someone’s head in for calling him that.”

Ghost flushes. “Didn’t know he used to beat people up over it.”

“He was a bit of a mess, that one,” David’s voice is fond, despite everything. “Gettin’ into scraps with everyone and anything over wee things. But he was always sensitive over that nickname.”

*“I can’t call Soap ‘Johnny,’” Alejandro had mused, once.*

*“Don’t,” Soap’s voice was a warning growl, rough in Ghost’s ear and sending a rush through his body. “Only Ghost can pull that off.”*

“I can see that,” Ghost says, as lightly as he can.

“We always used to joke that the nickname was saved for John’s future wi—” David cuts himself off quickly, though Ghost pieces the sentence together with little trouble.

*We always used to joke that the nickname was saved for John’s future wife.*

His stomach twists.

They pass by a couple walking their dog. The woman hugs her partner’s arm, her dark hair rustling in the morning breeze, and he smiles down at her. The sight is so saccharine, Ghost has to advert his eyes.

He glances at the man beside him, and he sees the way David MacTavish’s gaze lingers on the couple for a second too long.

When the older man turns back to meet Ghost’s eyes, there’s something complicated in his stare. Ghost doesn’t know what to make of it, he’s not even sure he wants to. His fingers tighten, uselessly, on

his sides.

“I’m sorry,” David says.

*‘It’s not me you should be apologizing to,’* Ghost wants to say, though the thought of Soap hearing about *this* sends his hackles raising. Judging by David’s pinched brow, he probably won’t tell his son about his slip-up.

Small mercies.

There are about a million things he can say to Soap’s father, a million other things he can do in retaliation for breaking his son’s heart, but he knows Soap will never forgive him for any of it. There’s a line drawn in the sand when it comes to family, and Ghost is nothing but a fake boyfriend. So he bites his tongue, tasting copper and unspoken words.

“Tell me, sir,” Ghost says, changing the topic. “What do you recommend we do while in town?”

When he and David finish their run and arrive back at the house, the smell of fried eggs and bacon and the sound of laughter from the kitchen greet them.

As David heads off to shower, Ghost heads down the hallway, following the noises.

“John,” he hears Sarah say and he slows, straining his ears to overhear the conversation. “About your boyfriend...”

“Yeah?” Soap asks. “What about Ghost?”

“Is he,” she clears her throat, “is he kind to you?”

Ghost stills.

Soap laughs awkwardly. “Sarah, what?”

“It’s just,” Sarah sounds contemplative, “I wasn’t kidding when I said he looked kinda scary.”

“You should see him with his mask on,” Soap says, though his voice is light. “Almost shit my pants the first time I saw him.”

Ghost’s eyebrows raise. He remembers their first meeting in vivid color, like he remembers every other interaction he’s had with Soap, and Soap hadn’t seemed all that freaked out at his presence. If anything, Ghost had been the one caught off guard by Soap’s cocky swagger and his sheer audacity.

“I don’t know,” Sarah says, again. “He doesn’t seem like your type.”

“What is my type?” Soap’s voice takes a harder edge now. “Go on, then, tell me.”

“Hey,” she says, quickly. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Then what did you mean it as?”

“Can you two stop gossiping and help me with this?” Lorraine interrupts her children this time, and her tone is firm enough that it quiets both Soap and his younger sister. Ghost hears them rustling around, the sound of dishes and utensils clanking together.

“He treats me well,” Soap says, after a beat. “He’s good to me. I trust him with my life.”

Ghost’s whole face floods bright red at his words. In another life, Soap would have made a fantastic actor, his voice was just soft enough to be believable.

“Hm,” Sarah hums, though she sounds unmoved. “What about your heart?”

Ghost’s breath catches.

Soap coughs. “Hell’s fuckin’ bells,” he splutters, sounding winded. “Since when did you become so cheesy? Yer bum’s oot the windae.”

The siblings fall silent again, and Ghost wills his face to return to a normal color. After a minute, he manages to head into the kitchen.

“Morning,” he says, as casually as he can.

“Morning, beautiful,” Soap greets him and sidles up in front of him. There’s no trace of discomfort or irritation on his face from his earlier conversation with his sister. There is, however, a smudge of what looks like flour swiped across his cheek.

“Morning,” Soap’s sisters chime in unison. Rebecca is chopping tomatoes and chatting with her mother, who shoots a small smile at Ghost. Sarah is turning something over on the stove, her back to them.

Ghost’s eyes drift back to Soap, who grins at him.

“Where’d you go this morning, gorgeous?” He asks.

“Away from you,” Ghost replies, dryly. “I went for a run with your dad, actually.”

“Oh,” Soap frowns at that and he seems a mix of both surprised and hopeful. “How was it?”

“Fine,” Ghost lies through his teeth.

Soap’s expression shifts on the precipice of disbelieving. He fiddles with his hands, gnawing on his bottom lip. “Ghost,” he whispers, soft enough that the rest of his family can’t hear. “If he said something to you—”

“No,” Ghost cuts him off, a little too loudly.

The women glance back at him, at his outburst, though Lorraine is the fastest to look away. Rebecca surveys him for only a moment longer than her mother, her gaze more curious than anything, before she turns back to her task. She’s the easiest to deal with, out of the whole lot, and Ghost tries to grasp onto that small comfort.

Sarah, however, lingers on Ghost. He’s been trained to read people’s facial expressions and body language, but even an amateur would be able to discern her utter distaste for him. Suspicion and worry seem to pour out of her in waves, and he can’t let him and Soap capsize into the treacherous waters.

Not now, now when Soap had entrusted him with something as delicate as this.

Ghost places a careful hand on Soap’s face. He’s warm under Ghost’s palm, the scruff of his jaw a rough contrast to the softness of his skin.

Soap blinks up at him.

“Ghost, what—”

Ghost leans down, slightly, and kisses his forehead.

A soft “*oh!*” escapes Soap’s mouth and Ghost feels a hand clamp down on his wrist in surprise. He waits for Soap to pry his hand away from the other’s face, but Soap never does. He lets him stay, despite everything, and Ghost allows himself the pleasure of this.

“You smell like ginger,” he whispers into Soap’s skin.

“Ginger shampoo,” Soap chokes out, and his hand tightens around Ghost’s wrist. “You sniffing me, beautiful?”

“No,” Ghost lies, again.

“And you called *me* the dog.”

“Woof,” Ghost deadpans and tries not to grin as Soap shakes with laughter. From this close, he can feel Soap’s laughter in his bones, and he aches to keep it there. To engrave the sound and feeling into his flesh until he was the only person who would ever know it.

After a beat, Ghost pulls away reluctantly and swipes his thumb across Soap’s cheek, wiping off the flour. Soap stares, his eyes wide and cheeks dusted a light pink. Ghost drops his hand quickly, his own face burning hot.

“You had something,” he clarifies, stupidly. “Flour, I think.”

“Oh,” Soap seems to snap out of his stupor at that. He gestures to the stovetop behind him. “I was making tattie scones.”

“Can I help?” Ghost asks and Soap hip checks him out of the way.

“Absolutely not,” he says, firmly, and heads back to the stove. “You almost blew up my flat’s kitchen the other day.”

“Not my fault,” Ghost goes to pick up a bowl, which promptly gets taken out of his hands by an emphatic Soap. “You need to check your gas pressure or something.”

“You were trying to make a salad, gorgeous. A fuckin’ salad.”

“Let me do something,” Ghost says, because he can’t really explain the whole kitchen incident either. He reaches for the bowl again, but Soap tugs it away from his prying hands, laughing.

“John,” Rebecca calls out, sending both of their heads snapping up. “Quit flirting and help out, ye nyaff.”



"I wasn't—" Soap glares and throws a potato wedge at his sister.  
"Fuck off."

"Aye," Sarah pipes up this time. "Ye howlin' slacker."

Soap doesn't hesitate to chuck another potato wedge in her direction.

"Children," Lorraine says, with the age-old exhaustion that probably comes with having Soap as a son; Ghost's heard that tone coming from Price a few times. He chokes back a laugh at Soap dutifully turning back to the stove, without so much as a stink-eye towards his sisters.

"Let me help," Ghost says, again.

"Fine," Soap sighs and hands Ghost a rolling pin. "Please don't burn down this kitchen."

As per request, Ghost does not burn down the kitchen.

The tatties turn out well, golden brown and savory, and he has to bat Soap away from sneaking pieces. An hour later, breakfast is laid out across the dining table and they're all sat, ready to eat.

"Here," Soap pushes some fried tomatoes and mushrooms onto Ghost's plate, "have some of this."

"I can feed myself," Ghost says, though he picks up his own fork and accepts the offering.

"I know," Soap grins at him. "Aren't I a great boyfriend?"

"You're a menace, that's what you are," Ghost mutters and bites into the tomatoes.

Soap's nephew, Blake, who's sat on the left side of Ghost, giggles at that.

For some unknown reason, he had decided to sit next to Ghost, rather than his own mother who sat across from them at the table. Ghost risks a glance at the little boy and sees that he's already staring at Ghost's face, something like wonder plastered over his own face. When he meets Ghost's eyes, he squeaks and stuffs his face with a

tattie.

Ghost glances back at Soap, hoping that the other could read his discomfort. Soap, irritatingly, has turned to say something to his mother. *Fucking fantastic.*

Exhaling slightly, Ghost pushes his plate toward Blake.

“Want my tattie?” he asks. “I don’t like them that much.”

Blake blinks up at him. “Really?”

“Sure,” Ghost says and slides the scone onto the boy’s plate. The smile stretching across his face is a shy thing, and he ducks his head as if to keep Ghost from seeing it.

“Thank you,” he whispers, his voice high and quiet. “They’re my favorite.”

“You’re welcome,” Ghost responds back and fights the urge to ruffle her hair. He’s a little boy for Christ’s sake, not some dog to be pet. “I’ll have Johnny make more for you, if you run out.”

Blake looks delighted at that.

When Ghost looks back up to Soap, he catches the other looking between them, an unreadable look flashing across his face for a beat. The next second, however, it’s gone and replaced with a cocksure grin.

“You cannae *have* me do anything,” he says, brandishing his fork like a weapon. “We’re on leave.”

“Can’t I?” Ghost asks, mildly, and bites into his fried egg. “I’m still your commanding officer, Johnny.”

“Awa’ and bile yer heid.”

“So,” Rebecca drawls, cutting their conversation short. “How’d *this* happen?”

Soap freezes and Ghost tries not to drop his fork.

“Uh,” Soap clears his throat. “How did what happen?”

“You’re stupider than you look,” His sister muses. Sarah snickers at that and Soap’s hand drifts to his plate.

Lorraine fixes her children with a stern look, as if she had a sixth sense for when a potential food fight was going to break out.

Soap drops his hand with a glare.

“C’mon, John, don’t act dense,” Rebecca continues, cutting into her linked sausage, though her interest is firmly cemented into the conversation at hand. “The few times we called this year you mentioned this mysterious lieutenant named Ghost, who always wore a mask and was, in your words, an *‘unreal sniper.’*”

Ghost blinks at that.

“Haud yer wheest,” Soap groans. “He saved my life.”

“Doesn’t mean you had to have a puppy dog crush on him.”

*Fucking hell.*

Ghost is going to die. More slowly and painfully than anything he’s been through before. He’s going to die in Scotland, sitting in a dining chair, while Soap’s family bores holes into him with their eyes.

“Yer aff yer heid,” Soap mutters. “I never had a puppy dog crush on him.”

“Then, how’d you two get together?” Rebecca asks, and Christ, Ghost had been so wrong in thinking that Soap’s older sister would be the brief reprieve they would get in the midst of Sarah’s suspicion and David and Lorraine’s stiffness. She was almost as much of a menace as her younger brother.

Soap’s hand lands on his knee and squeezes. Ghost does not jerk in surprise, but it’s a near thing.

He meets Soap’s wide eyes and, oh bloody fucking hell, it’s only then that a realization dawns on him.

They never made a cover story.

Somewhere across the world, he thinks Price might be banging his head against his desk in frustration. He sends a brief apology to their captain.

How they somehow managed to discuss everything *but* the backstory for their made-up relationship, Ghost doesn’t know. His brain had probably been too busy melting and leaking out of his ears at, well,

everything else about the trip. Somehow, it had escaped both of them.

*Shit.*

Ghost licks his lips.

He's blazed his way through hordes of men, he's crawled out of graves with nothing but his nails and a jawbone of a skeleton, he's survived knives to the back and bullets in his flesh. This...This is *fine*.

"I asked him out a week ago," Ghost says.

"I asked him out a month ago," Soap says at the same time.

Everything is *not* fine.

Soap squeezes his knee again and Ghost fixes him with a look that hopefully comes off as more sweet, than murderous. Soap stares back at him, smile just a tad too tense to be real.

"What Johnny means," Ghost clarifies, "is that we've been official for a week, but we've been together for a month."

"Aye," Soap replies, quickly, and his hand loosens on Ghost's knee. "Er, I asked him to put a label on things last month, but it didn't happen until recently."

"Why?" Sarah cuts in. He can feel the undercurrent of vitriol in her voice. *Why would he ever refuse John MacTavish?*

"Sarah," Lorraine admonishes her daughter, though she looks curious too. They all do. The back of Ghost's neck aches something awful.

He wants his mask back on his face, but the balaclava is tucked snugly in his pocket. His fingers twitch for it.

Soap glances at him, and back at his family. "I—" he starts, but Ghost cuts him off.

"I wasn't ready," he says and stares down at his plate. "I thought he deserved better than what I could give him. I still think he does."

And wasn't that the long and short of it? Ghost would laugh at it, at how this was probably the only grain of truth Soap's family would be receiving from him on the entire trip—yet, it was more he had willingly given to anyone, in a long time.

“Simon,” Soap breathes out, but Ghost clears his throat and keeps talking.

“He won me over, in the end,” Ghost pries Soap’s fingers off his leg and interlaces them with his own. He makes a show of putting their interlocked hands on the table, all the while pretending like his heart wasn’t at his throat. “Your son is something else.”

“All MacTavish charm,” Soap says, though he sounds distant. Ghost can feel the other’s eyes on him, but he knows if he looks back, he might say something he’ll regret. Something dangerous and far too real to be good.

“I’d die to know how he did that,” Rebecca laughs. “Did he give you flowers? Did he serenade you? Speaking of, has he shown you that record player, yet? Y’know, he used to go ‘round saying that it would attract so many hens—”

“That’s enough out of you,” Soap snaps.

“That’s sweet,” Lorraine says, and when Ghost looks at her, she meets his gaze and holds it. He tries not to flinch underneath the weight of her eyes on his, to keep his spine straight. “Sounds like our John.”

“He is,” Ghost replies. “He is sweet.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Soap’s sisters staring at him, Soap’s father pushing his food around on his plate, and the twins blowing raspberries at each other. His ache to put on his mask and vanish off the face of the earth claws at his ankles, grasping at him with talons.

Yet, still, he can’t bring himself to look away from Soap’s mother.

Something almost soft flashes over her eyes.

“I thought Ghost was a real intimidating bastard when we first met,” Soap says, so suddenly that it sends Ghost’s head whipping back around. The table quiets to hear him talk. “Never thought he and I would get close.”

His hand is rough against Ghost’s hand, calluses on calluses, scar tissue on new wounds.

“But then,” Soap continues. He looks at Ghost now, eyes so earnest and doe-eyed, Ghost almost falls into the honey trap of his lies, “he

saved my life and I saved his. He began letting me in, allowing me to see past the mask, and I couldn't get enough. So, of course, I had to chase after him, like a dog."

Ghost watches, head buzzing and face hot, as Soap lifts their hands together up to his mouth.

"He's the best person I've ever met," Soap murmurs. "You're the best person I've ever known, Simon."

He presses his mouth to Ghost's bruised knuckles, and Ghost takes his words, the most glorious placebos he's ever known, and swallows them down whole.

## Chapter End Notes

hope everyone has been having a wonderful 2023 so far woohoo!

i recently made a new [tumblr](#) so pls feel free to reach out

# salve on scars

## Chapter Notes

Quick recap of the MacTavish family:

David: Soap's father

Lorraine: Soap's mother

Rebecca (33): Soap's older sister by 6 years

John (27): the Soap himself.

Sarah (21): Soap's younger sister by 6 years

Maisie (5): Rebecca's daughter/Soap's niece

Blake (5): Rebecca's son/Soap's nephew

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Though nobody asks him to, Ghost finds himself helping Soap and his mother with the dishes after breakfast.

Lorraine and Soap had rebutted his help, but Ghost merely ignored them and plucked a sponge away from Soap's hands. Soap had scabbled to get it back, but Ghost had guarded that damn sponge with his life.

"It'll be faster if I help," he had said when Soap and his mother kept arguing, despite him already reaching into the sink for the dirty dishes. Fucking Scots: Stubborn until the bitter, bloody end.

Or maybe it was a particularly strong MacTavish gene, Ghost doesn't know.

"C'mon," Soap had replied. "You're a guest."

Ghost raises a brow. "I'm a little more than that, don't you think, Johnny?"

"Being my boyfriend doesn't mean that you're not still a guest."

*My boyfriend.*

Christ, that would always catch him off guard; belonging to Soap in a way that he had never belonged to someone before. He had assumed many roles over his relatively short, yet miserable life; but, he had never before been someone's lover.

Even if it was nothing but a dupe, Ghost can't help but tremble at the title.

He clears his throat and tries to stand his ground, not to be undone completely by Soap's words.

"I'm helping," he says like it's final. "It's the least I can do."

Lorraine blinks. "Thank you," she relents, finally. "You can help John wash. I'll put the dishes away."

After some huffing and puffing, her son also eventually chucks Ghost another set of dishwashing gloves. "You're such as stubborn eejit," he grumbles. "You could be taking a nap in my room or something, gorgeous. Not doin' chores."

It's an easy escape route; a chance to slip his mask back on and recollect his bearings. Everything in him *screams* at him to take it.

But...

Lorraine busies herself with drying the already-washed dishes, but he knows that she's sneaking glances every so often. He knows Soap can feel her stare too, judging from the way he refuses to look back at her. His shoulders bunch, ever so slightly.

Ghost isn't dead weight anywhere, not on the battlefield and not out of it; he won't start being it now.

"So kind of you," Ghost replies, dryly, "but I can wash some dishes."

His gloves, the fingerless ones he always wears, are already drenched from holding the sponge. Taking them off means letting go of said sponge to do so, and judging by Soap's almost bull-headed version of hospitality, he knows that the other man will take it as an opportunity to swipe the sponge back and force Ghost out of the kitchen.

Soap bats his eyelashes, a picture of perfect innocence. "Fine. Put the dishwashing gloves on, gorgeous," he says.

Ghost rolls his eyes. "What was all that talk about stubborn idiots, hm?" Soap smirks at him in response.

*Adapt and overcome.*

Ghost bites the edge of one glove and peels the fabric off with his teeth. He repeats the action, wincing at the taste of wet fabric in his



mouth, until both his hands are bare. Setting the gloves to the side, he's just as quick to slide on the rubber dishwashing ones.

"Pass me the dish detergent," he says, holding out an expectant hand.

When none comes, he glances back at Soap.

He's not looking at Ghost, but his gaze is fixed on the wet fingerless gloves that lie on the countertop. Interestingly, there's a flush high on his cheek.

"Johnny."

"Aye?" Soap blinks, and his stare slides to Ghost's face.

"Daydreaming?"

"Having the dirtiest of thoughts," Soap quips back, though the pink on his face hasn't faded yet.

"Yeah?" Ghost asks, casually, though he feels his heart pick up. He can feel Lorraine's eyes on them, but he doesn't have the willpower to glance away from Soap. He's long since lost that willpower, he'll admit.

"Aye," Soap nods. "M' thinking about these clarty dishes. So dirty."

He grins at Ghost, clearly proud of himself for his shitty joke, and Ghost can't help but huff to himself.

"Just pass the detergent, will you?"

Soap does so, though he doesn't stop running his cheeky mouth. Ghost would be hard-pressed to ask him to stop. "Since you're so eager, you can clean the frying pans. Hate washing those scabby buggers."

"Remind me, who's the lieutenant, and who's the sergeant here?" Ghost asks, lightly.

"Boyfriend privileges triumph military rankings here, beautiful. It's a rule."

"I didn't agree to that."

"Well, a rule's a rule," Soap runs a coffee mug under the water. He squints down at the ceramic cup, and a strand of hair falls into his eyes. The urge to tuck that strand back into place eats at Ghost. "So be

a good ol' boy and don't go 'round breaking it, now."

Ghost flicks water at his face and the other laughs.

Halfway through the dishes, Ghost feels a different set of eyes prickling at his skin.

He turns and sees Soap's five-year-old nephew and niece lingering just outside the kitchen. Blake and Maisie whisper to each other, shoving one another forward and scrambling back before they can breach the entrance. It's an interesting game of tug-a-war, and Ghost isn't quite sure who's winning at the moment.

When they make eye contact with him, the twins squeak like a pair of mice. Blake ducks behind Maisie.

"What are ye weans doin' here?" Lorraine asks her grandchildren.

"Wanted to talk to Uncle John," Maisie puffs her chest out. "Uncle John! Blake had a question!"

Blake knocks a fist into his sister's skull. "Ye doaty, *you* had the question!" he whispers, though his outrage is palpable.

"Did not!" Maisie cries.

"Did too."

The two tussle for a bit, before Soap clears his throat.

"Dinnae matter who asked the question," he assures the two and they pull away, reluctantly. "What is it?"

"Um," Maisie opens his mouth, though she glances from Lorraine to Ghost with unease. "Well, Blake was—"

"Don't ask here," Blake hisses, yanking on her hand. He glances at Ghost for a split second, then looks back down at the ground.

“Creepin’ Jesus!” Maisie sighs, like she feels the weight of the world on her shoulders. It’s amusing enough to send the corners of Ghost’s lips tilting. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Soap biting back a smile of his own.

“Fine. Uncle John,” Maisie says. “Blake wants to ask you a question in privately.”

“In private,” Blake corrects her and receives a noogie to his head for his troubles.

Soap raises his eyebrows at Ghost as if to say “ *What can you do?* ” and he takes his rubber gloves off. “Be back soon,” he promises. “Dinnae miss me too much.”

“Wouldn’t count on it,” Ghost lies and watches him follow his nephew and niece out. Blake glances back at Ghost one last time, sees that he’s looking, and blushes a bright red before scrambling away.

Even after knowing them for less than a day, Ghost had already gathered that the kid was deathly shy, in contrast to his more outgoing sister. Throughout their one interaction at breakfast, Blake could barely *look* at Ghost. Though, maybe *that* had more to do with the Glasgow scars lining Ghost’s face like a Hollywood villain, rather than meekness.

He frowns and turns back to the sink.

There had been a boy Simon Riley would have bled for, a boy that he *did* bleed for, but this boy hadn’t been so shy. He had been confident and loud, smiling gap-toothed grins that never failed to make Simon smirk back.

“Uncle Simon,” he would cheer and Simon would throw him into the air.

Maybe he would like tatties as much as Blake did.

Ghost wonders if Blake would think he was scarier with the mask on or off.

*Christ.*

He wants to bash his head into a wall. Just to keep the thoughts at bay, to stop *thinking* altogether. His past and present had no business intertwining into a spiderweb of splintering feelings. The Scottish air

really *was* making him mental.

“Ghost?”

Ghost flinches and looks up.

Lorraine MacTavish looks back at him, her hand outstretched.

“Uh,” Ghost rasps out, looking from her face to her hand. He has the odd urge to put his hand in hers, though it’s clearly not what she’s asking for. “Yes?”

“Are you done washing that?”

He goes to hand the mug in his hand over, she reaches out for it. Somewhere in between them, the cup drops and smashes onto the ground.

“Shit,” Ghost hisses before he can remember to censor himself.

“Fuck,” Lorraine gasps out at the same. “O’ *fuck* me, shite.”

Ghost would feel amused at the sight of a fifty-something woman cussing up a storm, if only he could stop his heart from pounding in his chest. The broken pieces of a ceramic mug blink up at him—its white stark against the mahogany brown of the floor.

Quickly, he peels off the rubber gloves and drops to his knees. “I’m sorry,” he murmurs and goes to pick up the shards. Then, he freezes.

There’s a stain on one of the bigger pieces, a brown smudge. *A coffee stain?*

That couldn’t be right. Ghost had *just* washed it; he had scrubbed the entire mug clean with his sponge. He knew how to wash dishes, how to keep a dish detergent bottle from running out for years, and how to scrape away a blemish from a bowl that had been sitting for weeks. A coffee stain should have caught his eye.

*It should have.*

Pulse thundering, he reaches for the shard and dares to look up at Lorraine. She’s rummaging in the cupboards for something. In the dim light of the kitchen, with only her back to Ghost, he can barely remember what her face looks like.

“It’s awrite,” She says. “Was my fault anyways.”

His hand closes around the piece of ceramic.

“Must be getting clumsy in my old age—oi, what are you doing, lad?”

Ghost blinks up and sees Lorraine looming over him. He briefly registers the dustpan in her hand. She frowns down at him, and the furrow in her brow sends his fingers tightening around the shard.

Her eyes widen.

“Dinnae pick up that, yer aff yer heid! What if you cut yourself?”

Ghost very kindly does not tell Soap’s mother that he’s been stabbed more times than he can count.

Lorraine drops down next to Ghost. When she puts a careful hand on his wrist, he’s surprised enough to drop the shard. The piece clatters back down to the ground, but he can’t tear his eyes away from Lorraine’s face.

He’s achingly fluent in the language of rage, but the look on her face is hard to translate. The lines around her mouth, etched gracefully over the years, are pulled taut. Yet, her eyes are...somber, almost. She searches his face back, and her gaze finally lands on Ghost’s scars.

He recognizes *this* look.

His stomach drops to the ground and joins the broken shards of the mug.

Ghost had known that Soap’s family has been staring at them, everybody does, but it was only now that he really *feels* it. The pity, the horror, and the skin-itching, all-consuming curiosity.

*Why is this the way you are?*

He tries to swallow and finds that his throat aches too much to open up. Pinpricks of pain dance across his palm and when he finally manages to look down, he sees that his hand is bloody.

Lorraine lets out a shaky breath.

When he feels her about to reach out to touch his hand again, he shoots back up to his feet. His heart thrums in his chest in time to a melody he thought he had unlearned years ago. The scars over his mouth pulse with a dull ache.

“I’ll wash off the cut,” he says, through clumsy lips. “I’m sorry.”

Ghost leaves the kitchen.

There’s a potted plant in the bathroom.

It’s on the bathroom counter, next to the soap dispenser; a green succulent with long leaves pointing in every which direction. Ghost can’t stop looking at it.

He knows that if he looks away, he’ll be greeted with his own face. The mirror in the MacTavish hallway bathroom is large, and even from his peripheral, Ghost can make out a familiar blur of his features. He keeps staring at the damned plant.

He doesn’t even have enough willpower to take the mask out of his pocket and slip it onto his own face. Not when he knows that he would have to take it off again, so soon.

*This was fine.*

In a minute or so, everything would be *fine*. He would be able to rinse out the wound on his hand and leave the bathroom with his head held up high. He would even be able to look Lorraine in the eye and apologize for dropping her mug.

But for now, he can’t uproot his feet planted firmly in the ground.

A knock sounds at the door.

“Occupied,” he grunts out. His voice sounds raw in his ears.

“It’s me,” Soap’s voice floats out from the other side.

“I’m pissing,” Ghost lies.

“Not true,” Soap shouts back. “I hear no stream.”

Ghost can’t help his eyebrows from shooting up. “Christ, MacTavish.”

“C’mon,” Soap knocks on the door again. “Maw told me you got cut, gorgeous. Let me bandage you up.”

The light reflects strangely off of the potted plant; the edges of the leaves are lined with spikes while the rest of its body is smooth. He resists the urge to reach out and touch.

When Ghost stays silent, Soap clears his throat again.

“Unless you want your cut to get infected and your hand to get swollen the size of an orange, till you cannae even cock a rifle and—”

“Shut up, Soap, fucking hell.”

Another voice cuts through whatever the other man is going to say next, and Ghost stiffens. *Shit*, Soap’s family. He barely makes out a distant: “*Is Ghost okay?*” before he pries the door open.

Soap stares at him, a first aid kit in one hand, and his other raised into a loose fist—as if he was about to knock on the door again.

“Ghost?” Soap gets out, surprised, before Ghost is yanking him inside by his shirt collar and kicking the door shut.

When Ghost lets go, the other man blinks the shock away from his eyes to smile at him.

“Thought it would take a little more convincing than that,” he says, breezily. “Was ready to pull out a hundred paged list of why you should let me in. Goin’ soft on me, L.t.?”

Ghost rolls his eyes. “No,” he grouses. “It would’ve looked strange to your family if I didn’t let my own boyfriend in while I was injured, now would it?”

Soap’s smile shutters for a moment. Then, he turns and places the first aid kit on the counter. “Awrite,” he says. “Let’s see that battle wound, Lieutenant.”

Ghost reaches out to swipe the first aid kit by himself. “I can do it,” he hisses when Soap bats his hands away. “It’s just a little cut.”

“I know you can,” Soap replies, and the calm, unmoving timbre of his voice causes Ghost to pause, “but I can do it better.”

“What makes you say that?”

Soap unlatches the kit and takes out a roll of adhesive plaster. "I've received more medical training than you, for one." Ghost tries not to scoff at the utter bullshit spewing from Soap's mouth.

"You're delusional," he manages. The look he receives for it is cheeky.

"Maybe," Soap allows and gestures to the lid of the toilet, "Can you take a seat? You're towering all over me and, frankly, there's not enough room for that here. Cannae concentrate on patching you up well."

"Out of your mind," Ghost mutters, but he sits down, because Soap *had* been right in saying that the bathroom was getting a bit too crowded with two full-grown men their size crammed in it.

"Good," Soap purrs, low and warm. Ghost feels his cheeks grow hot at the sound. "Must say, you take orders well, *sir*."

"Keep it tactical," he warns. "Or I'll string you up in this bathroom, Sergeant."

Soap hums like he doesn't hear the very real threat in Ghost's words. "At least it'll be in the motherland, eh?" He nears closer, holding a tube of antibiotic cream in one hand and the roll of plaster in his other, until he's standing in between Ghost's spread legs.

"Can I?" Soap's voice turns softer at that, asking for permission. Ghost tries not to unfurl into it, like a flower to the sun. When he meets Soap's eyes, though, he knows he's already failed.

"Fine. I've already cleaned it, so you can put the bloody plaster on me, if you're so desperate."

Soap's smile is *heartwrenching*.

"I'll be gentle," he promises, and, *oh*, that was what Ghost had been afraid of.

He looks away, fixing his eyes on the door behind Soap.

"Then, get on with it."

Soap nods and takes Ghost's hand in both of his, without a preamble. The rough pads of his fingers brush alongside Ghost's skin, as Soap turns his hand over, searching for the wound.

"What did Maisie and Blake want?" Ghost asks, to keep his attention



off the mindnumbing feeling of Soap's careful touch on his. At Soap's questioning hum, he clarifies. "Earlier, when you were dragged away by the little tykes."

"Oh," Soap looks flustered. "Nothing. Just the twins being the twins, y'know?"

"No," Ghost replies, dryly. "I've only talked to those two for five minutes in total."

Soap smirks down at him. "Yet Blake seems particularly interested in you," Ghost pretends his own curiosity (and nerves) isn't piqued by that statement. "I cannae see why."

"Smartarse."

Soap's thumb brushes over an old cigar burn on Ghost's hand and Ghost shivers at the light touch.

"What are you doing?" he manages when Soap doesn't stop tracing his thumb over the scar—a gift from Roba. He doesn't feel pain in it anymore, just a familiar itch begging to be scratched, and Soap's touch somehow *scratches* it in a way Ghost had never felt before.

"Your hands," Soap says, quietly. His voice still bounces off the walls of the too-small bathroom and rings in Ghost's ears. "Your hands are so—"

Ghost glares at the space past Soap's ear. "So what?"

"So..." Soap trails off. His middle finger runs along a nearly faded scar from Ghost's childhood that sits close to his wrist. He had fallen off his bike and landed on gravel. The sting of pebbles embedded into his skin couldn't even compare to the fire trailing from Soap's fingertips now.

"So *what*?" Ghost repeats.

"So nice," Soap finishes, quietly.

Ghost blinks.

*What?*

His gaze snaps up to Soap's face, but the other man doesn't look back at him. He studies Ghost's hands, not curious or horrified, but something else entirely. Ghost can't put a finger on it, but it's gentle

enough to send his head reeling.

Bloody MacTavishes and their complicated, unreadable looks. Ghost is going to need a visual dictionary at this point to keep up.

“I took an art class, once,” Soap continues. “Secondary school, an easy pass, I thought. In it, we had a section where we had to draw hands.”

He applies the cream to Ghost’s wound, carefully. His other hand traces patterns around the indents of canines on the back of Ghost’s hand—courtesy of his father and his creatures of the night.

“My first attempt was bowfin. Just awful, L.t. It looked more like a chicken claw than anything.” Soap huffs, amused. “I had always been good at drawing before then, so my ego was taking a real shiner to the face. Almost dropped the course entirely.”

“What changed?” Ghost asks, hoarsely.

“Practice makes perfect,” Soap shrugs. “I kept at it, sketched anyone and everyone’s hands. I actually became a bit obsessed. It was all I drew, for a little while.”

Soap begins wrapping Ghost’s palm with the adhesive plaster. “I’d like to draw your hands one day,” he says and touches an angry scab on Ghost’s knuckle where his skin had split open after a brutal wrestle with Price. The urge to *tell* Soap all of the stories that came with these wounds tugs at Ghost, if only for a second.

He bats that impulse away.

“I’m no hand model,” he replies.

“I never said I wanted a model,” Soap murmurs back and finally draws his gaze away from Ghost’s hands, back to his face. His eyes are earnest and Ghost wants to take him apart before he ever shows that look to someone else. “I said I wanted you.”

Ghost’s cold heart thuds.

“I thought artists hated drawing scars.”

“Says who?” Soap snorts.

“Heard that they were difficult to get down on paper.”

Soap cuts the end of the plaster, finishing wrapping Ghost’s hand.

“Only the boring ones don’t like a bit o’ a challenge, eh?” He winks at Ghost who only raises an eyebrow in response, “Besides, I like them.”

Ghost almost laughs at that. “Nobody *likes* scars, Johnny,” he combats. “Nobody likes looking at them for too long.”

“Again, L.t., says fucking who?”

Ghost frowns, thinking of the *heat* and *pressure* of the stares on his marred skin. He thinks of Lorraine’s gaze.

His thoughts get cut off when Soap’s hand touches his jaw. He tries not to lash out at the sudden feeling, tries not to flinch, but he can’t help the low, warning growl that escapes free from his lips—like he’s a caged animal.

He also can’t help but lean into the feeling.

Soap only stares down at him, calm.

“I must be a nobody, then,” he whispers, the gravel in his voice coloring his lies golden, “because I do like them.”

His fingertips inch up and they brush the edge of the Glasgow scar slashing across Ghost’s lips. With a snarl on his lips, Ghost digs his fingernails into his thighs, to keep from grabbing Soap. He wants Soap to keep his hand there forever, he wants to chew it off at his wrist.

*Kiss me*, he thinks, and his warring desires fall silent—unified under one front. *Kiss me*.

“Tried to draw this before,” Soap admits. His index finger taps the edge of the Glasgow smile. He doesn’t move any further than that. “After the first time you showed us your face. I always made them too long, too soft, too wide.”

His touch is dirt, rainfall, and knives to the throat. “Could never get it right. It drove me *crazy*.” Everything about him is dangerous.

“I’d like to draw your scars, Simon,” he finishes, simply. “I want to draw them, all of them, and I want to get it right, this time.”

Ghost’s head has always been too wise, but his heart is nothing but fire and ashes.

*Kiss me. Kiss me. Kiss me.*

Soap stares down at him for a second, before dropping his hand. He searches Ghost's eyes for an even longer beat, before he gives the other man a small, unreadable smile.

"Sorry, L.t.," he says. "Didn't mean to overstep."

Ghost's brain is a puddle.

"It's alright," he rasps, eventually. because, shockingly, it is.

He could have killed Soap for touching his face, but he didn't. He should have snapped his neck the minute he asked him to pretend to be his fake boyfriend. But Ghost didn't, and he never would.

His eyes dart back to the potted plant on the bathroom counter. *Aloe vera*, he now realizes, *the plant is aloe vera*.

The irony is not lost on Ghost. Here he was, in a cramped bathroom with scars that pulled and itched, and an aloe vera plant sat barely a few feet away. Yet, Soap's feather-light touch had soothed him more than any salve could.

The realization is a completely new twinge of pain in his chest that he had never felt before.

Muffled conversation outside breaks the silence.

"How long have they been in there?" That was Sarah. Her voice is floating down the hall, from the sitting room.

Ghost blinks and strains his ears to listen. If he and Soap are quiet enough, he can make out her voice a little more clearly.

"A while," Rebecca this time. "John's apparently patching Ghost up. He cut 'imself while washing the dishes with Maw. Dinnae ken if he's still 'patching' Ghost up though, if ye know what I mean."

"Rebecca," Sarah sounds disgusted.

"Oh dinnae gag, ye homophobe."

Sarah's noise of irritation is loud enough to capture Soap's attention. He looks from the door to Ghost, wide-eyed.

"I'm not homophobic," Sarah snaps at her older sister. "Why are you talkin' about *that* about our brother, ye nutter?"

Rebecca laughs. "Sounds like something a homophobe would say, eh? I just insinuated that they were smourching or something. You made it bogging."

"What are they, teenagers?"

"Oh, like ye didn't sneak boys into restrooms for a quick kiss back then. I know I did."

"Slut," Sarah says, though there's no real bite to her tone.

"Right on," Rebecca replies, cheerily. "Just let John have this, yeah?"

Ghost stills at that. *Just let John have this.* He looks back at Soap who looks back at the door with a flush high on his cheek.

He pictures Soap sitting on the sidelines and watching as his sisters brought boys home for their parents to meet and for sneaky hookups behind the very same parents' backs. He thinks of Soap taking girls home too, yet feeling nothing from the family dinners and juvenile kisses.

Had he dreamed about doing the same thing with a man?

Somehow, Ghost can come up with an answer to his own question.

"Howlin' blethers, the both of them," Soap mutters. "C'mon, L.t. let's bounce."

He goes to leave, but Ghost stops him with a hand on his wrist. Soap blinks at him in surprise, but Ghost holds tight. He rises to his feet and steps closer, sending Soap backing up in response, in order to keep a respectable distance between them.

Given the tiny bathroom, he ends up with his back against the bathroom door. After only a second of hesitation, Ghost leans in enough to place both his hands on the door frame, resting right above Soap's head.

*Boxing him in.*

The other stares up at him, throat bobbing.

"L.t.?"

"You said you were okay with me kissing your neck, yeah?"

“Uh, aye.” Soap’s cheeks blush a bright pink. “What about it?”

“Can I,” Ghost swallows, feeling like he’s being transported back into his sweaty, hormonal, and *stupid* teenage body. “Can I give you a hickey, Johnny?”

## Chapter End Notes

this chapter was a bit of a challenge to write if i'm going to be honest. but anyways its out :) uni also starts for me soon so updates might be more sporadic, apologies! but i will try my best to keep them as consistent as possible.  
come say hi on [tumblr](#)

# color theory

## Chapter Notes

Guide to the mactavish family:

David: Soap's father

Lorraine: Soap's mother

Rebecca (33): Soap's older sister by 6 years

John (27): the Soap himself.

Sarah (21): Soap's younger sister by 6 years

Maisie (5): Rebecca's daughter/Soap's niece

Blake (5): Rebecca's son/Soap's nephew

this fic has incredible art done by hermanthemoth on [twitter](#) and caroll-in on [tumblr](#). please please PLEASE check it out i am foaming at the mouth looking at it

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Soap *gawks* at him.

"L.t.," he sputters, "L.t., what the *fuck* did you just say to me?"

A bead of sweat trickles down the back of his neck. "You heard me."

"Humor me," Soap shoots back, and Ghost, like a coward, casts his gaze toward the ceiling. "L.t."

Ghost purses his lips. He silently wills his face to remain impassive and cool, but the flush rushing over his cheeks refuses to obey.

"Simon."

His name in Soap's mouth comes out low and rough, a call to attention that sends every hair on the back of his neck standing up. A shiver ripples through him at the sound.

"Simon, look at me."

He can't ignore this beckoning, and his eyes are drawn back to Soap.

Soap stares at him, his eyes narrowed. The distinct feeling that he's *searching* for something in Ghost's face sends his nerves spiking. He

doesn't know what Soap's looking for, doesn't know if he has it or not.

All he knows is that he would like to dig his teeth into Soap's throat and never let go.

"Run that by me again," Soap demands, and his tone leaves no room for argument.

"I want to give you a mark," Ghost manages, "where everyone can see."

Soap's eyes widen.

"You want to..." He trails off. "Why?"

Ghost swallows.

"Your sisters think we're doing something in here."

One of his hands floats down from its perch on the doorframe, almost of its own accord, and hovers just above the base of Soap's throat. Soap's lashes flutter as he glances down at it, but he makes no move to bat it away.

Ghost doesn't touch him either. Not yet.

"They're a pair of blethering hens," Soap responds. At Ghost's raised eyebrow, he clarifies: "Gossips. Should I get you a Scottish dictionary for Christmas, L.t.?"

"If we live long enough until then, sure."

Ghost lets the pads of his fingertips trail over the hollow of Soap's throat. A shiver of surprise wracks through the other's body and seeps into Ghost's own trembling hand. He stops when he reaches Soap's Adam's apple—index finger pressed against cartilage.

"Let's give them something to gossip about, Johnny."

Soap exhales shakily. "Steamin' Jesus, L.t.," he rasps. "You can't just say shit like that."

"Is that a yes or no?"

Soap runs a hand through his hair. His eyes dart from Ghost's hand on his neck, to his face, then back down to Ghost's hand. When he chews



pensively on his bottom lip, Ghost fights the urge to lean in and leave his own indents in the pink of Soap's mouth.

"Awrite."

The breath leaves Ghost's lungs. "Yeah?"

Soap nods, minutely, and bares his neck.

As a testament to his strength, Ghost does not drop to his knees.

He slides his hand from Soap's throat to the back of his head, cradling his skull. His hair's impossibly soft and Ghost can't help but loosely thread his fingers in the strands.

Soap clears his throat.

"C'mon," he says, voice slightly choked. "Get on with it."

"Nervous?" Ghost asks. He means it as a genuine question, but judging by Soap's offended squint up at him, it probably came off drier than he intended.

"Can it, L.t.," Soap grumbles.

Ghost very wisely shuts up.

Bracing himself with one hand on the door frame and his other tangled through the mess of Soap's hair, Ghost leans down and presses his lips to Soap's neck.

*Bloody fucking hell.*

Immediately, the acrid cocktail of ginger and gunpowder fills his nose, the distinct mixture that seemed to cling to Soap like his own cologne. He could drown in the smell, he thinks.

Fucking Christ, he wishes he *could*.

"L.t.," Soap breathes out.

Ghost hums in response and trails his lips up the length of Soap's neck.

His skin under Ghost's lips is warm. Warmer than the sun, warmer than anything else Ghost had had the pleasure of sinking his rotting teeth into.

Soap swallows and the sound is a gunshot.

“Good?” Ghost whispers and his lips brush a patch of skin, just below the ear, that has Soap gasping. Interesting. He can feel every tremor from this close, with their bodies so close together, and his face almost buried against Soap’s throat. “Still with me, Johnny?”

“Aye,” Soap’s voice rumbles through his throat and into Ghost’s ears. “I’m, *fuck*, this is just kind of weird.”

“Do you want to stop?”

“No!” Soap’s cry is oddly high-pitched and borderline frantic, but when Ghost pulls away just enough to read the other’s face, there’s no trace of uncomfortableness in his features. All that greets him is Soap’s earnest eyes and flushed cheeks. “I’m fine. Are you?”

*Was that even a question?*

“Affirmative,” Ghost confirms. With a sigh of relief, Soap tilts his neck to the side further and Ghost takes it as a sign to retake his place at the base of Soap’s throat.

But he pauses before reattaching his lips to Soap’s neck.

“Why did you say this was weird?”

Soap laughs, nervously. “How is it not, sir? I never thought in a million years that you would...That we would...” He trails off, voice faltering.

Then, he clears his throat. “Besides, nobody’s asked me about leaving marks before.”

“Why?”

“Because I never let them to begin with,” Soap replies, and the admission nearly knocks Ghost off his feet.

“*What*,” he croaks. “Johnny, you’ve never—”

“I’ve gotten hickeys before,” Soap rushes to admit, indignant. “But not since I was around...eighteen? I cannae just walk around looking like I’ve been ravished, especially in our line of work, L.t. Unprofessional appearance in uniform and all that.”

Despite his dismissive words, his tone takes on almost a wistful,

longing tinge. Ghost licks his lips.

“Price wouldn’t give two shits.”

“Aye, well,” Soap shifts on his feet. “I’ll keep that in mind for the next man who drags me into the washroom and asks to suck on my neck like a vampire.”

Ghost’s fingers tighten in Soap’s hair.

Jealousy, the ugly, useless beast in his chest, rears its head and all but snarls. Soap with another man, the next *real* man who would seamlessly take Ghost’s place. Soap being pinned to a bathroom wall, writhing and panting for more, as a faceless prat nipped at his neck.

Shades of purple and blue littering his throat.

Ghost pulls Soap’s head back, none too gently.

Soap yelps as his throat is suddenly bared and vulnerable, but Ghost can barely hear over the blood rushing in his ears.

He leans down and *grazes* his teeth on Soap’s skin.

“Fuck,” Soap cries out and his hands flail, reaching for Ghost. When they land on Ghost’s waist, Ghost trembles, but he doesn’t shrug him off. Not when Soap’s hands feel like heaven on his body.

“Is this okay?” The other rasps, and Ghost nods into his neck. Soap holds him a little tighter at the approval and Ghost arches into it, despite himself—into the impossible heat that seems to pour out of Soap in cascades.

Ghost digs his teeth a little harder into Soap’s skin, drawing a tiny whine out of the other.

Time crawls by, as slow and sweet as honey, as he works a mark onto Soap, until the other is left trembling under his lips.

“Ghost,” Soap whispers.

“Hm?” Ghost hums, drunk off the taste of the other in his mouth. He sucks Soap’s skin in between his teeth and pulls, a little too hard, and he revels in the way the other man spasms because of it.

He’s so responsive, it makes Ghost’s knees weak.

"Ghost," Soap breathes out. "Simon, that feels..."

"Talk to me," Ghost nips at the mark. "C'mon, Johnny."

"Sore," Soap grunts out, and Ghost licks the same spot he's been all but gnawing at, in apology. "You're, *fuck*, really rough, L.t. Feels like you're trying to eat me alive."

Ghost swallows, face burning hot.

"Gotta go hard to make it noticeable."

"That right? H-how much longer?" Soap asks, breathlessly.

*Forever, if you'll have me.*

"Just a little bit," he forces himself to respond, instead, and mouths at Soap's neck.

Something like a mewl escapes the other man's lips, and, *bloody fucking Christ*, any blood that had been in Ghost's brain leaves to go somewhere...south.

After a moment, Soap's hands leave his waist, and Ghost barely has a minute to mourn their loss, before he feels the other's arms winding around his body, slowly. When his hands come to a rest, they hover over Ghost's back.

He can almost feel the heat radiating off of Soap's fingertips.

His head spins.

"You can touch," he rasps out, quietly. "You can touch me."

With a shiver, Soap places his hands on Ghost's back and pulls him in closer, until they're separated by mere centimeters.

*Christ.*

The need to grab Soap by his hips, close the distance, and meld their bodies into an amalgamation of *him and Johnny* rushes over him.

Soap whines, almost impatiently, and Ghost is suddenly reminded of why they're here. Why he's allowed this pleasure in the first place.

Their farce.

"Almost done," he whispers against Soap's skin, before dragging his teeth from the hickey to the corner of Soap's jaw. He kisses the spot, right below the ear, that had had Soap gasping. One last hit for a dying, selfish man. "You're doing good for me, Johnny."

Soap *chokes*.

His hands scrabble on Ghost's back, his blunt nails dragging down the length of Ghost's shoulder blades. Even through the material of Ghost's shirt, they manage to leave a stinging trail in their wake. It's ginger, gunpowder, and utterly electrifying.

Ghost muffles his moan into Soap's throat.

A bang on the door sends them both tensing.

"Occupied," Soap rasps.

Another knock follows the door, more insistent.

"Awright, awright!" Soap snaps. He pulls away from Ghost, who quickly *throttles* the urge to manhandle him back in place. "Should've been an only child," the other man rants, quietly. "Hell's fuckin' bells, I should've eaten Rebecca and Sarah in the womb."

Ghost wipes the back of his mouth. "You're not triplets, you weren't in there together." He's half-surprised that his voice even works at this point, but Soap snorts, so he must sound somewhat intelligible.

"Anyone ever tell you you're a smartarse, sir?"

"Just you."

"I'll have the cadets call you that more often."

Soap goes to turn, reaching for the doorknob.

Ghost puts a hand on his shoulder and Soap freezes, turning his face back up to Ghost. Heat curls through Ghost's already overly sensitive skin at the sight that greets him: Soap's eyes are glazed over and his bottom lip is bitten raw.

The urge to consume him whole rises in his throat like bile.

He tears his eyes away long enough to look at the mark he left on Soap's throat. It's an angry shade of maroon, glistening bright with Ghost's spit. Something primal roils in Ghost's stomach at the sight of

it staining Soap's skin.

He wants to see it turn purple. He wants Soap to wear it like a collar.

"You have some sharp teeth, L.t." Soap says, though his voice lacks his usual teasing edge. It almost sounds... embarrassed. "How does it... look?"

Ghost swipes his thumb over the reddening mark and feels the other man tremble.

"Good. It looks good on you."

*I look good on you.*

There's another knock at the door but this time, Soap is slower to turn toward it. It takes another impatient rap on the wood for the other man to finally reach out and wrench it open.

"Rebecca, you nosey fuckin' cow—*Dad?*"

David MacTavish looks at them.

Ghost doesn't know who to strangle, himself or Soap. Maybe he'd kill them both later that night. When they crawled into bed together.

His face flames.

*Fucking hell.*

Soap's jaw works, and Ghost can practically see the excuses and shitty deflections already queuing up in his mind. When the other man opens his mouth, Ghost jabs him in the side as subtly as he can.

"Mr. MacTavish," he says, through his teeth.

"Ghost," David replies, though his eyes are fixed firmly on his son. Or, more specifically, a certain, noticeable crimson mark painting Soap's neck. "John."

Soap makes a strangled noise. Ghost can't even picture what horrible shade of red his own face is turning right now. They would probably stand there for centuries, gawking like a pair of idiots, if it weren't for David.

Apparently tired of their blank-eyed stares, Soap's father pushes past them to the bathroom. Before he shuts the door behind him, however,

he pauses and glances at Ghost.

“You alright, lad?”

Ghost follows his gaze down to the plaster wrapped around his palm. Christ, he had nearly forgotten that it was there.

“Yes, sir.”

David MacTavish nods, somewhat awkwardly. “Good. That’s good.”

“Great,” Soap says. “We’re all great, that’s pure dead brilliant. So, we’re just gonna...” he takes Ghost’s wrist and begins inching down the hallway. And with one last glance at Ghost’s bandaged hand, David MacTavish ducks into the restroom.

Soap takes it as a sign to power walk down the hallway with Ghost at his heels.

“Johnny,” Ghost says, after a long minute of silence.

Soap growls and shakes his head, frantically. “Another word out of you, L.t., and I’ll sock you in that pretty face,” he threatens. Then, something like a hysterical laugh bubbles from his lips. “What the *fuck* just happened.”

Ghost lets the other babble away to himself; he, himself, is all too distracted by the love bite blooming on Soap’s neck. If he squints, he thinks he can delude himself into thinking that it’s turning a nice shade of purple already.

“The look on his face,” Soap is muttering to himself, mortification pinching at his brow. Although, there’s also something bright like giddy lighting up his eyes too. “Jesus wept, thought I was gonna shit myself. I actually felt my soul leave my fuckin’ body, sir.”

Soap smacks him on the back, casually, like he wasn’t just clawing at it a second ago. Ghost’s shoulder blades sting under the impact.

Though he feels no blood soaking his shirt, he prays to whatever god is out there, that Soap scratched him hard enough to bleed crimson.

When the MacTavishes reconvene for later that night for dinner, it's Maisie who opens the can of worms.

"Uncle John," she says, though she speaks loudly enough that the rest of the table turns. "Did you get bitten by a bug? Like Spider-man?"

Ghost can hear David MacTavish cough, but honestly, he would rather gouge his eyes out with the fork in his hand than look at Soap's father's face right then. Rebecca, who had been scooping peas onto her daughter's plate, whips her head up so fast, Ghost wonders if she got whiplash from it.

When she spots the hickey, a smirk spreads across her face. "Why, that *does* look like a bug bite, Mais" she ruffles her daughter's hair. "You're so smart. Such good observational skills, you're just like your maw, eh?"

"Looks more like you got mauled by a tiger," Sarah chimes in, and Soap bristles.

"What does mauled mean?" Maisie asks, and Blake pauses his usual not-so-subtle staring at Ghost to glance at his twin.

"Bitten," he clarifies.

Maisie gasps.

"*Down, boy,*" Ghost mouths towards Soap, who still looks pissed. The other snaps his teeth at him in retaliation, sarcastically, though he settles back in his seat.

The hickey is finally beginning to fade into a shade of violet and Ghost can't stop *looking* at it. It's beautiful on Soap's skin, another battle scar to join the collection on his body. He wonders if he'll be able to take a polaroid of it and sleep with it tucked under his pillow every night.

"I'm fine, Maisie," Soap addresses his niece. "I didn't get bitten or mauled."

"Then, what happened?" Sarah presses. "Did you *fall* on your neck?"

"No, but you should fall on yours," Soap says, and Rebecca snorts.

"Choke," Sarah replies, dryly, at David's raised eyebrow, she shrugs. "Only joking, Dad."



It's hard to remember that these three are adults when they're all back in each other's presence, trading insults like it was secondary school all over again. There was something about Rebecca's gleeful teasing and Sarah's harsher jabs that seems to revert Soap into something more...simple.

It's *strange*.

He catches Sarah's eye for a split second, and they both glance away at the same time.

Lorraine sighs, long-suffering. "Your children are menaces," she tells her husband. "Battering each other about hickeys like they're in S1."

All three MacTavish siblings stare at their mother, slack-jawed.

"Maw," Soap sputters. "How do you know that word?"

"*John*," Lorraine says, and her tone is so weary that her children look away, rightfully abashed. "I know what a hickey is, Steamin' Jesus, and I certainly know what they look like. My daughters were pure keech at hiding theirs while growing up."

Ghost, who had just taken a bite of his food, tries very hard not to choke.

"Maw," Rebecca complains as Sarah takes a long chug of her wine. "Stop airin' out our family's dirty laundry, hell's bells."

"Dirty laundry? Rebecca, be serious."

Soap wheezes in pure and utter joy, and David stifles his own chuckles at the expense of his children. Even the twins giggle, though they clearly have no idea what everyone's talking about. Their laughter tinges the air in a sugary sweetness that Ghost can nearly taste.

He feels his own lips twitch and he presses a hand to his mouth, lingering long enough until he can feel the curve of it flatten out again.

Just then, Soap's hand slides on top of his own. Ghost turns to face him. Soap isn't looking at him, choosing to rib at his sisters, but his thumb rubs along Ghost's knuckles—almost soothingly.

Ghost studies him for a beat, mouth dry, before his eyes are inevitably drawn back to the bruise on Soap's neck. Looking closer, he realizes

that it's not just a solid shade of violet; it's a cacophony of blue, purple, and red. He's never been much of an artist but he thinks this might be his best and only masterpiece yet.

He lifts his free hand, ready to brush over it, one last time.

"So," Maisie cuts through the chatter, and his hand drops. "What's a hickey?"

The next day, Ghost rises with the sun.

Soap had been curled up against him again, the same position Ghost had woken to next time—if not a little closer. With Soap's arm around his waist and fading lines of red left by Soap's nails on his back, Ghost had almost felt...branded.

The thought was almost a comfort.

Since when had ownership and possession been something that sent his skin flushing and mind racing?

Panic, an old friend he was quickly becoming reacquainted with, had slithered up his skin as his thoughts spiraled. Ghost had slipped free from Soap and his bed to leave the room.

Now, he finds himself in the garden, a cigarette in between his teeth, and his balaclava pulled up to his nose.

His foot taps against the loose soil of the ground, jittery. The nicotine does little to take his mind off of Soap, but at this point, Ghost doubts that even the hardest drugs will be able to do the trick. There's a Johnny-shaped indent etched onto his hippocampus, and Ghost can think of no solution to *that* problem other than scooping his brains out of his skull.

He closes his eyes, the taste of smoke and salty skin filling his mouth.

The garden door slides open behind him and Sarah MacTacvish steps outside.

Ghost stiffens.

The MacTavishes exist on a scale between lukewarm and outright hostile, and it's Soap's younger sister cemented herself in the *hostile* end of the spectrum. If Ghost were to be bluntly honest, he would rather not have alone time with her.

Still, he swallows back his irritation and says, as politely as he can: "Morning, Sarah."

She pauses.

"You didnae even turn around," she says, though she sounds somewhat begrudgingly impressed. "How'd you know it was me?"

Ghost stays silent and takes a drag from his cigarette.

"Spooky."

Sarah comes up next to him and when he glances at her, her eyes are fixed firmly on the skyline.

"You're up early," he says and her gaze slides lazily toward him.

"Aye. Got another cig?"

Ghost pulls out his pack and tosses a roll to her. She squints at the crumpled pack before he tucks it back in his pockets.

"Sterling?"

Ghost nods and she hums, disapprovingly. "Mayfair's better," she mumbles though she sticks the cigarette in her mouth and pulls her lighter out. "Nice ski mask."

Ghost taps his cigarette on the ashtray he had found abandoned in between two dying flower bushes at the edge of the garden. Apparently, Soap's parents weren't much for gardening.

"Thanks," he replies, simply, and silently wills Sarah not to talk anymore.

But she's John MacTavish's baby sister, so she does quite literally the opposite of what he wants, and chooses to dig under his skin, instead.

Annoying must also be a genetic trait in the family.

“John told me about how you wouldn’t show your face to anyone. Even off duty,” Sarah blows smoke out into the air. “How mysterious.”

He tries to swallow, but the taste of ashes in his mouth burns his tongue.

“I’m not the only person there that hides their face,” he responds as casually as he can. “Your brother’s the outlier by not covering his.”

“It’s an identity protection thing, eh?”

“Something like that.”

“Interesting,” Sarah murmurs, and when he finally gathers the nerves to glance back at her, she’s staring right at him. Her familiar green-blue eyes bore into his flesh. “What identity are you even protecting?”

Ghost blinks. “Sorry?”

“I mean,” she taps her cigarette out on the ashtray. The ashes flutter down into the bowl, like snowfall. “You don’t seem to exist. I looked you up. There’s no mention of a ‘Simon Riley’ anywhere. At least, not a Simon Riley that looks like you.”

Ghost watches the amber glow of her cigarette butt. “You looked me up?” He asks, blank.

“You’re my brother’s boyfriend, who he met on an elite, secretive military task force,” Sarah responds. “Why wouldn’t I?”

His throat closes. She hadn’t been able to find anything about him, she never would be able to, with his records being scrubbed clean, thanks to the military, but...

*A family reportedly found dead in their home, murdered. No witnesses, no evidence. Survived by their brother, son, and uncle: Simon Riley.*

“You think I’m going to hurt your brother or something?” He tamps down the flames of rage in his voice, keeping his tone chilly. It was almost laughable how quickly the MacTavishes seemed to find the most tender spots in him, poking and prodding until he thought he might burst.

“Maybe not on purpose,” Sarah admits, lifting her cigarette back to her lips. “But I think John would let you.”

Ghost grinds his teeth. "You have a lack of faith in him, then."

"I do," Sarah replies. "I know John. I spent my whole life chasing after him, wanting to be him, Ghost. And I see the way he looks at you and it fuckin' scares me."

"How does he look at me?"

Sarah exhales, and a stream of smoke pours out of her nostrils.

"I'm sure you don't need me to spell it out for you."

A tense silence falls over them.

"I dinnae ken what you want with him, in the long run. I dinnae ken if you're actually planning on sticking around after this," Sarah stubs her cigarette out, snuffing out embers with a violent crush. "But John clearly wants you to. So, can you just...Can you keep him safe, for the time being?"

She seems like a smart woman, but Ghost almost wants to laugh at just how wrong she is. "He can keep himself safe. He doesn't need me."

And it's the truth. Soap doesn't and never has *needed* Ghost. It's Ghost who thinks he might shatter without the other.

Sarah's mouth twists.

"If you actually believe that," she says, her words are poison to the heart. "You clearly don't know your own boyfriend."

The door bangs open a second time, keeping Ghost from answering, and Soap's footsteps ring in his ears.

"Johnny," Ghost calls out. He doesn't turn around. He can't look at Soap right now, not when Sarah's words still echo in his ears. *You clearly don't know your own boyfriend.*

"Morning," Soap responds, his voice husky from sleep.

"How *do* you do that?" Sarah asks Ghost. There's no more animosity in her words, and her question is nonchalant. "You got eyes on the back of your head?"

"Fuckin' cool, eh?" Soap sidles up in between him and Sarah, a physical barrier of muscle and warm smiles. Ghost's shoulders slacken

ever so slightly. “He can tell who’s walking up to him, just by listening to their steps. Scares the keech out the cadets, you should see it.”

“Brag about your own skills, love,” Ghost’s cigarette is burned down to the filter and he puts it out on the ashtray. “You sound like a fanboy.”

“Who would I be if I didn’t brag about your accomplishments, gorgeous?”

*A saner man.*

“Can you do it with any other senses? Like touch? Or smell?” Sarah asks.

“No,” Ghost lies, shortly. He can’t, with most people, but...

“I dinnae ken,” Soap muses. “You’re pure howlin’, Sarah, I’m sure he could whiff you out in a crowd.”

“Dickheed.”

Soap leans back, snickering, and his arm brushes against Ghost’s own.

He thinks he could recognize Soap’s presence anywhere. The sound his feet made when they struck the earth, the way his breaths came and went, the smell of ginger and gunpowder on his skin. There had never been a man quite like John MacTavish, and Ghost doubts that there ever would be again.

## Chapter End Notes

\*taps mic\* hello everybody my name’s markiplier and welcome back to five nights at freddys–

i’ve decided that i will be probably be updating this fic every two weeks, primarily on the weekends. also, from the looks of it, this will be 10 chapters (maybe 11 or 12 if i overwrite AGAIN). and there will be light smut, though it will be towards the end of the fic and i’ll include the appropriate tags then. thanks for your patience and for reading, as always.

come say hi on [tumblr](#)

# hand of gold

## Chapter Notes

king hozier is the only reason i managed to finish this chapter.  
title is a lyric from [would that i](#).

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When Soap proposes going out for the rest of the day, just the two of them, Ghost is torn between sighing in relief versus digging his heels firmly into the ground.

On one hand, getting a brief reprieve from the MacTavishes and their prying eyes, quick mouths, and terrifying ability to hook their fingernails into the underbelly of Ghost's armor and *tear* has the knot in his neck loosening.

On the other hand...

When he hesitates too long, Soap peers at him, his eyes boring through Ghost's flesh and bones.

"Unless you want to stay here?"

After his jarring talk with Sarah, leaving seems like fleeing, it feels a little too close to giving up.

Soap waits for his answer, patiently.

"Whatever you want," Ghost says, eventually, because that's as close to the truth as his brain will let him admit. "I'll do whatever you want."

"That's not really an answer, L.t.," Soap complains, but Ghost offers him no further elaboration. Soap sighs. "Fine, let's go out."

"Okay," Ghost responds, easily, and Soap squints at him.

"I changed my mind. We're staying here."

"Okay."

The groan that erupts from Soap's throat is earth-shattering in volume

and in the sheer amount of annoyance that seems to drip from it. "Express an opinion, Lt," he says. "I know you have plenty of 'em."

"It's your trip," Ghost reminds him. "I'm just along for the ride."

Soap blows out an exasperated breath of air, and the stray strand of hair hanging loose from his usual hairdo flutters against his forehead, ever so gently. Ghost watches its movement, the way every part of Soap seems so vivacious and alive, enough to breathe life back into something as dead as hair.

*Christ.*

A word, a concept, forms in Ghost's brain at the sight; but before he can unravel the revelation, Soap interrupts him.

"I'm only here because of you," he says. "I only get to do this because of you."

Ghost blinks.

"You do know that, right?" Soap asks, quiet and careful, like Ghost is a fawn not to be spooked. "This is your trip too."

*This is yours.*

It's Ghost's turn to let out a breath of air. He wants to find Lorraine and David, shake them by their shoulders, and ask them just how they managed to raise the best and worst kind of man possible. *A total fuckin' heartbreaker.*

"Let's go," Ghost manages. "Let's go out."

The grin Soap gives him for the response is both approving and utterly blinding.

Before they can even make it to the front door, however, a physical barricade all but appears before them. Rebecca.

Even though she's a good few inches shorter than him and many pounds lighter, Soap skids to a stop at the sight of her. Ghost slows behind him, following his lead.



“Are you heading out?” Rebecca directs her question at her younger brother, who nods. A gleam enters her eyes at the confirmation.

“John,” she says. “John, sweet dear brother of mine.”

“No,” Soap steps forward as if to shoulder-check her out of the way, but his sister keeps talking, stubborn in the face of rejection. *Bloody MacTavishes*.

“I have some phone calls I need to make and the weans are antsy,” she says. “Can you take them with you?”

“You dinnae ken where we’re even going,” Soap exclaims, though Ghost hears the very clear lack of “no” in his words. He’s being difficult just for the sake of being difficult. “What if Ghost and I were going to get blootered or something?”

“It’s the afternoon. You’re not a day drinker.”

“Maybe Ghost is,” Soap combats and Rebecca fixes Ghost with an assessing look that nearly borders on the edge of disapproving.

“I’m not,” he feels compelled to say. “And we’re not getting pissed.”

“Betrayed by my own lieutenant,” Soap says, mournfully.

“By your boyfriend,” Ghost corrects him, hyper-aware of Rebecca’s eyes still watching them. Soap makes an odd noise in the back of his throat. *Drama king*.

“Even worse.”

A giggle interrupts their conversation, and Ghost looks down to see Maisie scampering down the hallway at an almost alarmingly fast pace for a five-year-old. Soap barely has time to brace himself before she’s throwing herself into him and holding onto his leg like a spider monkey.

“Maw,” she says, though her eyes are fixed firmly on Soap’s face. “I want to go with Uncle John.”

Soap makes a mock-shocked expression down at her, mouth dropping open into an “o” and eyebrows shooting up.

“You do?” He asks. “*Really?*”

She nods, her mouth set and chin jutting out. Soap raises his leg,

lifting it off the ground ever so slightly, and Maisie squeals, clinging on tighter to Soap's jeans as she too is lifted slightly off the ground.

"So strong," Soap marvels, shaking his leg—as if to dislodge his niece to no avail—though he puts no real force behind it. "Must. Escape."

"No!" Maisie shrieks, gleefully.

She must put her whole weight on Soap's leg just then, because the man stumbles back slightly, balance teetering. Ghost steps closer and places a hand on the small of his back, steadying him.

"Careful," he murmurs, into Soap's ear. "Don't fall."

He can hear Soap's breath catch.

"Worried about me, beautiful?"

"Worried that you might give the poor girl a concussion if you fall on your arse,"

Soap laughs, a breathless thing.

"Well, you'll just have to catch me if I do, eh?"

Ghost presses his palm more firmly to Soap's back, inching closer, wishing that he could keep going—until Soap's back was flush against his chest and Ghost's chin was hooked over Soap's shoulder. He licks his lips, wanting, aching, *thinking* too much to be considered healthy.

A shiver wracks through Soap's body, almost violently, and Ghost withdraws his hand.

"Catch yourself," he mutters and drops his hand back down uselessly to his side.

"Where's the fun in that? I'd rather have you do it," Soap replies, lightly, though there's something else in his tone that Ghost can't quite discern. He doesn't have much time to ponder about and untangle it, before he catches movement out of the corner of his eye.

Soap's nephew and Maisie's twin brother sidles beside his mother and tucks himself close to Rebecca's billowing bohemian skirt, clutching at the material with tiny fists.

"Blake," Soap calls out. "Want to join us on an adventure?"

Blake looks up at his mother and she places a hand on his head, nodding encouragingly down at her son.

“Are you going too?” He asks her, so quietly, Ghost has to strain his ears to hear him.

Rebecca shakes her head. “No, wee yin,” she says. “I have to work. But Uncle John, Maisie, and Ghost are going.” Blake’s eyes flicker to Ghost at his name before darting away the next second.

They wait a moment for his response, before Blake slowly nods.

Maisie cheers and prances forward, chattering a mile a minute, while Blake listens to her, patient. Rebecca smiles down at her children before looking back at Soap and Ghost.

“So you’ll take them?” She asks, though her tone clearly knows the answer, judging from the air of smugness in it.

“Cannae blame them for wanting to get out for a wee bit,” Soap shrugs, “and away from you, of course.”

“Dickheed,” Rebecca says. “My children adore me.”

“Age has made you delusional,” Soap all but sings, and dodges his sister’s well-aimed kick to his shins. Laughing, he gestures to the children, drawing their gazes to him.

“Blake, Mais,” he crouches down in front of them. Maisie stands at attention, like a soldier at inspection, in sharp contrast to her brother who studies the floor, avoiding Soap’s gaze. “You two better get changed for our adventure.”

Constantly surrounded by other members of the 141 and KorTac, it’s easy to forget just how broad Soap is—how he wears muscle and strength as well as an Armani suit. As he kneels before his nephew and niece, a sturdy shield between them and whatever may be stupid enough to try to harm them, the broadness is *stark*.

Ghost knows Soap’s strong—*Bloody hell*, he’s one of the strongest men Ghost knows—but seeing that strength displayed so innocently, so casually, sends his palms sweating.

With some difficulty, he tears his stare away and looks up to meet Rebecca’s eyes. She’s studying him, though she makes no effort to hide it like her younger sister Sarah or Soap’s parents do. Right on cue,

Ghost's skin prickles, and his neck starts aching—dull phantom pangs reverberating through his spine.

At this point, with all the MacTavish eyes on him, assessing and scrutinizing his every move, he should be immune to it all.

He's decidedly not, though.

As if to pity him, Rebecca offers him a smile and turns her gaze back on her brother and her children. After a beat, Ghost follows her stare.

"What are we going?" Maisie asks her uncle, who leans in and whispers something to his niece and nephew. Maisie's eyes light with joy at whatever she hears and Blake looks up from the floor to cast the briefest of assessing looks across Soap's face.

"Really?" He asks.

A flicker of surprise makes its way through Ghost at the sheer amount of excitement packed away in that one word. It's the most he's seen Blake so geared up for something, in the short time he's known the kid.

"Aye, *really*, wee man," Soap smirks.

Blake looks away, but there's a smile stretching across his face that he can't hide.

Soap nudges Maisie's shoulder, gently pushing her toward the direction of the stairs. He doesn't touch Blake, though. "Go on," he urges them. "Get ready."

Maisie holds out a hand to her brother, who takes it easily. Together, they hurry up the stairs, giggling and whispering amongst themselves.

Soap watches them go, a fond grin tugging at the edge of his lips. Ghost watches him, feeling unmoored.

"Where are you taking them?" Rebecca asks and Soap's attention snaps back to her. He stands and waggles his eyebrows at his sister.

"The Bahamas," he tells her. "They deserve a vacation."

"They *are* on vacation."

"A vacation from you, I mean," Soap grins a big stupid smile, like his comeback isn't something manufactured and distributed in a primary

school classroom. Ghost tries to maintain a neutral face, but something on his face must convey some level of disgust—because when he accidentally catches Rebecca’s eye, she sees it.

She snorts, eyes filling with mirth. Ghost purses his lips to keep from joining her.

Soap looks between them.

“Thank God the military career worked out,” Rebecca says, as mildly as she can. “Cannae imagine what would have happened if you tried to go into comedy.”

“Oi.”

Ghost exhales, long and hard through his nose, and Soap’s gaze snaps back to him.

“You shouldn’t be laughin,’ gorgeous. You made a joke about two goldfish in a tank once. Fuckin’ *army humor*. ”

“I’m not laughing,” Ghost replies. “Are you hearing things, love?”

“You were, just now!”

Rebecca *tsks*, sympathetically. “Too many wackings to the head on the battlefield, it seems. Must have a TBI.”

“My hearing’s pure dead brilliant,” Soap snaps.

“He *has* been setting off too many bombs without earplugs,” Ghost says. “I’ll have him checked up when we get back.”

Soap groans.

“You two make me miserable,” he announces, and turns on his heel. “I’m gonna grab some things before we leave. Keep crackin’ jokes, ye bampots. Fuckin’ dobbers.” With that, he stalks off.

Rebecca snickers at his retreating back.

“He’s getting easier to rile up,” she comments. “You’re makin’ him all soft.”

Ghost pauses at that.

“He’s not soft,” he says. “He’s a soldier.”

Rebecca glances at him, the smile on her face fading somewhat.

“Maybe I worded it wrong,” she acquiesces. “Sarah’s always been the easiest to get all bothered, out of all of us. Poor thing can’t take a joke to save her life. John, though? He’s the hardest to get to.”

“That’s a bit of a surprise,” Ghost replies, because it is. At Rebecca’s raised eyebrow, he elaborates. “He told me about Annie’s Room. You definitely got a reaction out of him then.”

Rebecca laughs, surprised.

“He told you about that? I had to get stitches, y’know, from his teeth. He was ten.” She says it all with a smile on her face. “Fuckin’ menace of a child.”

“Fuckin’ menace of a man.”

Rebecca shrugs, like she doesn’t necessarily agree or disagree.

“Maybe now. But since he was thirteen, John was a bit o’ a brick wall.”

She taps her fingers against her leg. “I mean, he blethered on about how he could get hens with his looks and that howlin’ record player. He would even bring a lass over to ‘study’ sometimes,” she makes air quotes on the studying, “which is everything a teenage lad would do, but...”

She shrugs.

“I could never tease him about any of ‘em and get a reaction out of him,” she cuts Ghost with a knowing look. “Not like now. Not like I can with him and you.”

Ghost swallows, thickly.

“It’s been a while since I’ve seen him like this, actually,” Rebecca muses, more to herself than to Ghost. She’s not even looking at him as she speaks—her eyes hazy with unreachable, private memories of a childhood long gone. It’s only this pensiveness that betrays her honesty.

Ghost doesn’t know what to make of it.

“Seen him like what?” He asks, throat raw.

“So carefree, so sensitive,” Rebecca responds. “It’s like he’s ten all over again.”

Eventually, he, Soap, Maisie, and Blake finally reconvene and pile into the car.

“Seatbelts?” Soap asks his backseat passengers, and with their confirmation, he wraps a hand around Ghost’s headrest and begins reversing out. Ghost, very carefully, looks out the window and does not tear his gaze away—until they’re safely on the road and Soap withdraws his arm.

“Where are we going?” Ghost asks, and glances at the review mirror.

Maisie is singing to herself, playing with the pair of gloves Rebecca had been sure to slip her on their way out. Blake is pressing his nose to the window, his breath fogging up the glass, and staring outside. His foot bounces rhythmically, and Ghost can see the boy’s whole body vibrating in anticipation.

*Christ, what, or where, could get a kid like Blake so excited?*

Soap hums, and Ghost risks a look back at him.

The other man’s eyes are fixed on the road in front of them, but he smiles, like he can see Ghost looking at him in his periphery. Ghost watches him, for a second too long, before asking again.

“Where are we going?”

“Secret,” Soap responds.

Ghost frowns.

“You told them,” he jerks a thumb back at the backseat, “and you told Rebecca before we left.”

“I did.”

“So, it’s a secret from only *me*.”

The sweet curl of Soap’s smile sharpens into something more

mischievous.

“Isn’t that what I said?” He asks, innocently.

Ghost fingers the edge of his balaclava, well-worn from constant use, on his lap. If they were going into town...It’s one thing to have the MacTavishes looking at his bare face every day. It’s another entirely for Soap’s entire town to see him without a mask on.

It’s a line that he won’t cross.

He glances back at Blake, who’s now drawing tiny blobs on the fog on his window. He hopes Blake doesn’t find his mask scary. He has an inkling that Maisie won’t care, brave to a fault like her uncle and mother, but Blake... He’s gentle, in a way Ghost knows Soap is not, in a way that Ghost has never been.

He doesn’t really know the kid, but—

Ghost’s breath catches.

*He doesn’t fucking know the kid.*

He exhales, shakily.

A rock settles in the pit of his stomach, but he can’t look away from this boy: from his blonde hair curling around the nape of his neck, the Star Wars shirt hugging his frame, to the gleam of childish joy in his eyes. They’re wisps of a past, equally familiar and haunting.

But they’re just that. Wisps of the past. Smoke clouding Ghost’s eyes—making him see a phantom in a stranger.

Feeling eyes on him, Blake looks back at him.

Their eyes meet, and Ghost’s chest tightens.

“Ghost?”

Soap’s voice draws him back. Ghost turns and looks at the man beside him. The rock in his stomach settles, somewhat, at the familiar sight.

“Your mask,” Soap starts, quietly so the children don’t overhear. “You wore it around Sarah.”

Ghost nods, stiffly.



Soap casts a worried gaze at him. "You know you can," he licks his lips. "You can wear it around them. My family."

Ghost blinks. "I don't need your permission," he starts, though his voice is cursedly weak.

"No, ah ken," Soap rushes to explain. His fingers twitch around the steering wheel. "This isn't me giving you permission. I'm just sayin', that if you need to wear it, they won't say anything about it."

"You don't know that."

"I do," Soap says, and his voice takes on a rougher edge. "I'll make sure of it."

Ghost stills.

"Don't—" he swallows, unsure of how to elaborate without ripping his chest open and letting Soap inspect every bloody corner of his ribcage. "Don't pick fights with them." *Not over me.*

"I pick fights with everyone, L.t." Soap corrects him. "Especially them."

Ghost snorts.

"Someone'll put you six feet under for that soon enough."

"Maybe," Soap shrugs. "But until then, you're stuck with me."

Ghost's heart skips a beat.

"How tragic for me," he deadpans.

"Liar," Soap sing-songs. "I'm your favorite sergeant."

"Dunno about that. Gaz makes great tea."

"Two-timer," Soap accuses, and Ghost bites back a laugh bubbling in his throat.

"What's a two-timer?" Maisie pipes up from behind them.

Soap flushes, caught off guard. He glances at Ghost in alarm, who can only shrug helplessly. He's not getting involved, lest Rebecca strings him up for explaining what "two-timing" is to her five-year-old daughter.

“A very bad man,” Soap says, eventually. “A man who makes his wife very unhappy. Or his husband, I guess.”

Maisie shrieks, so loudly, Soap nearly swivels them onto the other side of the road.

“Mais,” he calls out, panicked. Ghost twists in his seat to check up on the girl, but she’s unharmed. As a matter of fact, she looks *ecstatic*.

“She’s fine,” he tells Soap, whose shoulders loosen slightly.

“Uncle John,” Maisie squeals. “But you said that you and Ghost weren’t—”

“Oi,” Soap cuts her off, stern. “Don’t scream while I’m driving, please.”

“But—”

“*Maisie*.”

She sighs and leans back in her car seat. “Sorry,” she says, properly abashed.

“It’s awrite,” Soap replies and checks his review mirror. Despite his assuring tone, he still looks tense. He rests his free hand on the gear shift, his fingers tapping out an anxious rhythm.

Ghost touches his wrist, to capture his attention.

“Johnny,” he starts, then falters.

In one quick move, Soap slides their hands together, fingers interlocking. Ghost stares down at their threaded fingers, before looking back at Soap.

“Alright?” he asks.

Soap squeezes his hand in response.

It’s clear he’s a bit shaken up, and doesn’t want to show his alarm to his niece and nephew. Maybe that was why he was holding Ghost’s hand like a lifeline. Ghost lets him do as he pleases.

There’s a beat of silence before Maisie breaks it, much quieter this time.

“Is Ghost really a two-timer?”

Ghost coughs.

Soap’s death grip on his fingers loosens, somewhat, though he doesn’t let go, just yet.

“No,” Soap replies, though there’s a hint of mirth in his tone that Ghost doesn’t really appreciate. “He’s not.”

His thumb traces circles over Ghost’s gloved hand.

“He makes me happy,” Soap continues, terrifyingly sweet. “I’m the happiest man alive, Mais.”

“The woods?” Ghost asks, when Soap eventually pulls over. An expanse of trees as far as the eye can see stretches before them. If he were to guess, they’re just shy out of town—Lanark is surrounded by these woods. He fixes Soap with a look. “Are you planning on burying a body?”

“Yes,” Soap deadpans. “And I brought my five-year-old niece and nephew along to help shovel.”

Ghost glances at the twins, who are helping each other shrug on their coats.

“Better than taking them to the pub,” Ghost allows. “Your dad said the pubs in this town are pure shit.”

Soap raises a brow.

“You’ve been talking to my dad about...pubs?”

“No,” Ghost fiddles with his balaclava, before tucking it into his back pocket. “I asked him about things to do in Lanark and he gave me a few. Though they were mostly ones to avoid. Specifically the pubs here—what?”

Soap blinks at him. The look on his face is difficult to discern and it sends Ghost’s skin crawling.

“What?” he asks again, when the look doesn’t fade. Eventually, Soap shakes his head and smirks at him.

“Nothing, nothing,” he replies, airily. “It’s just...You takin’ me out on a date, beautiful?”

Ghost chokes.

*“What.”*

“I dinnae ken why you would ask an old man for good date spots, but,” Soap shrugs, “it’s sweet.”

“Johnny,” Ghost mutters, face flushing hotly. “Shut the fuck up.”

“I’m just saying!” Soap nudges their shoulders together, their knuckles brushing. “Ask me next time. I know some real romantic places.”

“I doubt that.”

“Uncle John,” the twins chorus in unison, and his and Soap’s gazes snap back to them. “Let’s go!”

“Awright, ye impatient bairns.” Soap slides away from Ghost and reaches out a hand to Maisie, who takes it without hesitation. She begins tugging him towards the trail into the woods, though Soap doesn’t let her get very far.

He holds out his other hand for Blake, who shies away from it.

“C’mon, wee man,” he coaxes. “Rules remember? You cannae walk alone.”

Blake bites his lip and shuffles his feet.

Then, before Ghost even has a chance to blink, the little boy is suddenly at his side. He reaches out for Ghost, his tiny hand inching towards Ghost’s own. His gaze, however, is stubbornly fixed on the ground, his cheeks glowing a bright pink.

Ghost stares down at him, his heartbeat loud in his ears. His hand moves away, on instinct, and Blake freezes.

“Blake,” Soap calls out, gently. “You don’t like it when people touch you sometimes, eh?”

After a moment, Blake nods.

“Ghost might feel the same,” Blake’s eyes shoot towards Ghost at that, searching for confirmation. It takes everything in Ghost to hold his gaze and not go bolting in the other direction. *He’s just a kid, he’s just a kid, he’s just a—* “So ask if you can hold his hand, wee man.”

Blake swallows, his little throat bobbing.

“Can I,” he asks, softly. “Can I hold your hand?”

Ghost lets out a shaky breath. Then, he nods.

“Okay,” he rasps, and lets Blake’s hand, a small and delicate thing, take his own.

Like most men, Ghost wants.

His desires might be a little different from the usual dreams of cars, money, and beautiful women; yet still, he *wants* for things as any other living person does.

For the longest time, he had a dream of a cabin, snug in the woods.

There wasn’t a specific design or location he had in mind, just the idea of a cabin isolated in some forest was enough for him. It would have his guns and rifles, his dogs, and his own bed—ultimately, it would be all *his* . A place where he could rest his aching joints and creaky bones.

He had shoved that desire somewhere deep down over the past few years, so as to not become distracted by what was happening in the present. Now though, as he treks through these woods, the hidden fantasy unburies itself from the sand.

The woods surrounding Lanark are beautiful. Ghost can almost picture himself building a cabin right here.

Blake tugs on his hand, stopping him in his tracks.

The little boy crouches down, studying the dirt. Ghost joins him, careful not to dislodge their intertwined hands.

The ground before them, littered with dead leaves and branches, is

unremarkable. Ghost glances at Blake's face, which is squinted in concentration, as he brushes some leaves aside with his free hand.

"No," Blake breathes out, a few seconds later, disappointed.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?" Ghost asks.

Blake flushes and purses his lips shut. He stands, hurriedly, and tugs at Ghost's hand, signaling for the other to stand. Ghost does so, and they rejoin Maisie and Soap who wait nearby.

Maisie is studying a bug crawling up a tree with fascination, though Soap is physically barring her from reaching out and picking it up. The two glance at Blake expectantly when he returns, and he shakes his head.

"We'll see some soon," Maisie reassures her brother, before gesturing to the bug on the tree. "What kind of bug is this? Can I eat it?"

"Don't," Soap warns. "You'll be too full for dinner if you eat a bug."

Ghost lets go of Blake's hand and the boy joins his sister by the tree. When he approaches Soap, the other man smiles at him.

"You like hunting, eh?" Soap asks, and Ghost nods. "Could never get into it."

"Really?" Ghost asks.

It's Soap's turn to nod. "Got too antsy during the wait," he confesses. "And the killing was equally uninteresting. You know me, L.t., I prefer a good chase."

"Your dad take you out hunting?" Ghost asks, and Soap nods.

"A few times. He preferred taking Rebecca, honestly. Sarah didn't care for it and I was a good shot, but I got bored. Fell asleep sometimes too."

"Remind me to ask Price to never put you on sniper duty."

Soap punches his shoulder for that, lightly.

Ghost studies the twins. Maisie is cooing at the bug, while Blake circles the tree, probably looking for more signs of life. "How about them? Would Rebecca ever take them hunting?"

Soap laughs. “Dad wants to when they’re old enough. They fuckin’ love the woods, so he thinks they might like hunting. Maisie might want to, but Blake? No way. He’s soft, that one.” Soap’s voice is practically dripping in fondness.

“You say it like it’s a good thing,” Ghost comments, before he can stop himself.

Soap looks at him.

“How do you mean?”

Ghost licks his lips, tasting ash and brimstone. If he tries hard enough, he thinks he might be able to hear the sound of a cruel chuckle and the rattle of a snake, in the quiet of the forest.

“Aren’t you worried,” he says. “That all that softness will hurt him?”

Soap studies him.

“Maybe it will,” he says, after a beat. “In our world, it would. But—”

“Uncle John,” Blake calls out, and their gazes swivel to him. He’s a few feet away from them, kneeling in the dirt, his jeans covered in mud. Maisie hovers over him, a wide smile on her face.

The boy points at the ground. “I found a trail,” he says, softly, but the glee on his face is breathtaking.

“Hell’s bells, good job, lad!” Soap praises and rushes to his nephew, Ghost hot on his heels. Before Blake, Ghost can make out a trail of... hoofprints embedding the wet dirt. He squints down at it.

*Elk?*

He crouches down beside Blake.

“Lookin’ for elk?” he asks, and Blake shakes his head.

“They don’t live here,” he says. “They’re not, um...” he trails off.

“Native?” Ghost offers, and Blake nods.

“I’m looking for deer. I found rabbits, badgers, mice, hedgehogs, and moles,” he says, quickly, words spilling clumsy from his lips. “But I’ve never seen deer here before.”

“Looks like you’re close,” Ghost replies, and gestures to the trail before them. “What kind of deer are they?”

“Western roe deer,” Blake recites with the air of a long-suffering professor, and Ghost hums.

“They’re nocturnal and these tracks are pretty new,” he says. “So they’re probably resting somewhere nearby.”

Blake cocks his head. “Nocturnal?”

“They sleep during the day, and are awake at night,” Ghost clarifies. “Like owls.”

“Wicked,” Blake breathes out, eyes glittering, and he holds out a hand to Ghost. “Can I hold your hand?”

When Ghost nods, the boy takes his hand in his and jumps to his feet. “C’mon, c’mon,” he chants, tugging at Ghost’s hand. “They’re close right? You said they were close.”

Ghost swallows down a laugh, and rises as well. “Probably, but they’re light sleepers. So we have to be quiet if we want to find them.” Blake’s eyes widen and he nods, holding onto Ghost’s fingers tighter.

Ghost glances down at the trail of hoofprints. If he were to estimate, the deer was probably nearby, but it would still be a trek to find it. Not to mention, just how jumpy deer were, even in sleep. Even the smallest sound would set it on alert.

“Is it safe if we go down this way?” He asks Soap. When Soap doesn’t respond, he glances back up at the other man.

That strange look from before, when they were joking about date spots, is plastered on his face. Only this time, it’s softer around the edges, and the flush on his face is bright. He looks... *he looks...*

Ghost’s head spins.

“Johnny,” he whispers. This expression on his face...it almost seems...

Soap meets his eyes, and his mouth opens, as if to say something.

Ghost’s gut wrenches and roils in anticipation.

“Ghost,” Blake calls out, and Ghost startles. It’s the first time he’s heard the boy say his name. He glances over at him instinctively, and



Blake gestures impatiently to the trail. "Can we go?"

"Aye," Soap responds for him. His voice is so quiet, it almost sounds hoarse. "Aye, it's safe."

Ghost blinks, and the moment is gone. Another fantasy buried six feet in the sand.

They follow the trail until it runs cold.

Blake seems defeated at the seemingly dead end, but Ghost taps on his hand to recapture his attention. "Roe deer don't sleep in places they feel is unsafe," he tells him. "They're good at finding hiding places where most predators can't find them. Look around some more."

Blake brightens and tugs his sister along to investigate the area around them.

He and Soap keep an eye on them as they stand together.

"You know a lot about wildlife," Soap murmurs, and Ghost looks at him. He's looking at Ghost, not with the same heartwrenching expression as before, but something more...quiet. "Is it because you hunt?"

Ghost turns to watch Blake poke in a mound of dirt with a stick.

"Not really."

Soap makes a noise of confusion. "You some sort of animal expert, L.t.? Secret biology major?"

"Didn't go to uni," Ghost responds. "My, uh, my father taught me."

Soap inhales.

Ghost watches the light dappling through the winding, stretching branches of the trees. They're colossal and ancient in a way no human could ever hope to achieve. The thought returns some air back into his lungs.

"He was a butcher," Ghost says. "And he prided himself in shooting

and bringing in his own game.”

A bird sings in the distance.

“He brought me hunting and he brought animals home to me,” Ghost says, the past filling his mouth with coarse gravel and gasoline. “I hated it.”

It’s a sorry way to explain years of teeth tearing into his skin, digging bloody knives into fur, and choking out laughter in the face of death. But it’s all he can offer Soap. He hopes Soap can accept this meager offering.

“But you still hunt,” Soap says, not really a question, but Ghost still answers.

“Yeah. Whenever I have the chance,” he says. He can’t explain why he does, he doesn’t think he ever will be able to. “I was going to go during this leave.”

“You still can,” Soap says, his voice hushed, yet never losing its gravelly strength. “My dad would love a hunting partner. I can tag along too.”

Before Ghost can answer, Blake is waving over to them. He’s silent, but the joy splitting his face into a brilliant grin has Ghost straightening. He and Soap tiptoe toward the twins.

When they’re close enough, Blake and Maisie gesture to a brush, nearby.

A deer lies there, sleeping. A tiny blob is tucked close to its side, and it’s only a second later that Ghost realizes that it’s a fawn. In the afternoon light, their coats take on a shade of bronze, rich and vibrant.

Blake’s hand slips in his, and though Ghost can’t tamp down the flinch at the sudden contact, he finds himself grasping the boy’s hand. Blake’s fingers, fragile enough to crush, tighten around his.

Ghost looks back at Soap, then.

If the sun was kind to the deer, then it paints Soap reverentially. The sunlight caresses his face in a Midas touch, turning him golden and lovely. His eyes are honey and hickory leaves.

“Fuckin’ beautiful,” Soap breathes out, watching the deer. “Have you ever seen somethin’ like it, Simon?”

*I love you*, Ghost realizes, just then. The realization is not a gunshot, it’s not blood in his mouth, it’s not a punch to the ribs. It’s warm, palpable, and *bloody fucking Christ*, it feels a little like coming home. *I love you*.

“No,” he replies. “I haven’t.”

## Chapter End Notes

come say hi on [tumblr](#)

# nothing and everything

## Chapter Notes

check out [this incredible art](#) by saltycryptid on tumblr! its inspired by chapter 5 and people (literally me) died

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He stands in front of a familiar, red-brick house.

There's a potted plant, leaves wilting from a lack of water, near the door. The doormat beneath his boots is coarse and caked with mud, with the words '*Welcome Home*' fading after years of being trampled over by careless heels.

It's familiar in a way that sets his teeth on edge, protecting his gums and molars from a sugar rush.

"Hey," Soap nudges his shoulder, and Ghost's shoulders loosen at the feeling of him. His grin is as vibrant as ever. "You ready?"

Ghost scratches the bottom of his chin. "No," he admits, because he knows he'll get a laugh for brutal honesty. Sure enough, Soap's mouth parts to let out a soft amused sound, and like clockwork, Ghost's heart warms.

"C'mon," Soap laces their fingers together. "How bad can it be?"

"Very bad," Ghost answers, dryly, before squeezing Soap's fingers tighter. "So bloody bad."

"Drama queen."

"Well, you know me," Ghost rings the doorbell with his free hand, and Soap laughs again.

"Aye," the other man says, his voice terribly fond. "I do know you, Simon."

Ghost can't help but raise an eyebrow at that.

"Do you?" He asks. "Tell me, what do you know about me, Sergeant?"

“I know you’re a hardass,” Soap responds, just as quickly. “I know you’re an excellent fuckin’ shot. I know you like whiskey and bourbon and other disgusting shit that makes your throat feel like hell.”

His teeth gleam in the sun as he continues. They’re sharper than Ghost had thought they would be. “I know you care about the 141.”

Ghost glances away, just to stop leaning in and licking Soap’s canines with his tongue. His wandering gaze bounces back to the door in front of them, studying it with a detached curiosity. The door is painted black and chipped to hell and back.

It remains firmly shut in their faces.

“I know you like your tea at boiling temperature,” Soap continues to list off. “I know you like reading and hate watching telly. I know you would die for anyone on our team. I know you lost your virginity to a girl when you were sixteen and thought about clawing your skin off afterward. I know when you first held a rifle in your hands and shot something with a beating heart.”

Ghost watches the door, waiting for it to swing open.

“I know what you look like when you blush.”

“You know too much,” Ghost says, eventually, because there’s nothing else left to say.

“I know *you*,” Soap corrects.

The door stays closed.

“Isn’t that what I just said?” Ghost responds. *You know too much.*

Flecks of mahogany peek through the peeling paint of the door. Unpeeled, unhidden. He reaches out a thumb to cover the spots up, but Soap’s hand in his weighs his arm back down. Like an anchor, like a burden.

“Tell me something I don’t know about you,” Soap’s words are a challenge.

Ghost considers this for a long moment.

“I love you,” he confesses, “and I don’t think I can unlearn how to.”

He tears his eyes away from the shut door to look back at Soap and

his fangs and his smile.

Soap meets his stare head-on.

His eyes are green, gold, blue, every color under the sun seeping away from the world and into his irises. Not for the first time, Ghost wonders how Soap sees the world around them. What would it be like to have John MacTavish's eyes, his brain, his ribcage?

Some twisted part of him wants to take a knife in his hand and find out.

"Oh," Soap responds.

"Oh?"

Soap blinks, and clears his throat. "I expected that," he says.

"Sod off," Ghost mutters. "I just told you that I love you. How the fuck did you 'expect' that?"

"You're not as good as you think you are." Before Ghost can refute that, Soap purses his lips. "Besides, you're taking me to see them, eh? Of course you love me."

"Them?"

*Who was 'them'?*

Before he can question Soap about whoever 'them' was, the other cocks his head. "Do they want to see me?"

"They do," Ghost responds, though he's not sure what he's agreeing to. All he knows is that everyone should want to see Soap, like a parched man should want to see water. There's little question about it. "They're excited to meet you. I've told them about you."

Soap's lips quirk up. "Do they want to see you?" He asks this time.

Ghost blinks.

"I—"

A 'yes' is on the tip of his tongue, but it seems like a lie. Soap's eyes darken, almost in pity. Then, his gaze drops away from Ghost's and down to the ground.

Ghost's own gaze falls to the ground as well, before freezing.

There's a trickle of crimson on the ground.

"Soap," Ghost calls out, but Soap looks impassive. Uninjured.

His eyes follow the trickle to the source.

The door.

The steady stream gushes from the crack under the door, like the inside of the house was flooding. An oozing, festering wound bursting at the seams, begging to be opened.

"Johnny," Ghost says, again, desperation turning his veins to ice.  
"Johnny."

Soap reaches for the door, and Ghost tugs on his hand, willing him back. Nothing good would come of it. Nothing good could come of Soap's hand on the doorknob and the hinges of the door rotating to let it open.

Nothing good is waiting on the other side.

"You can't," Ghost whispers. "Sweetheart, I *can't*."

The '*Welcome Home*' mat is now rusted red and Ghost can't look away from it.

"Simon," Soap says, like he doesn't hear Ghost, maybe he can't. He drops their joined hands. "C'mon, doll, they're expecting us."

Ghost stays cemented to the step, letting the crimson river seep into his boots.

His mother patiently waits on the other side, as do his brother and sister-in-law. His nephew with his head full of curled ringlets and starship dreams, calls for him within the red-brick walls. Their blood fills up the soles of his boots, soaking his socks, and staining his heels red.

"Simon," Soap stands before the wound, ready to tear the stitches wide open. Ghost reaches for him. "Simon, Simon, Simon—"

“Simon!”

Ghost’s eyes fly open.

He sits up, heartbeat pounding in his ears. In sleep-muddled instinct, he blindly reaches out and grabs whoever looms over him on the bed.

The person lets out a grunt of surprise—they feel surprisingly strong under Ghost’s hands, broad and muscled—but puts up a minimal fight as Ghost drags them down. With one quick motion, Ghost has them flipped; the person on their back, and Ghost all but straddling them.

When the other begins to struggle, Ghost slides a warning hand over their throat, squeezing down on their windpipes. He doesn’t press down hard enough to cut down circulation, but it’s enough of a threat that the person underneath him stops trying to buck him off. Slowly, the initial alarm ebbs away and Ghost blinks away the haze of sleep in his eyes.

He looks down at the person underneath him.

He freezes.

“Johnny?”

Soap looks at him, hair tousled and chest heaving.

“Well,” he wheezes out. “Good fuckin’ mornin’ to you too, doll.”

*Fuck.*

Ghost’s hand on Soap’s throat slackens in shock.

“What the fuck,” he gets out, words slurring together. “What the fuck were you doing?”

“Sleeping,” Soap frowns up at him. “Until you started mumbling and shaking in your sleep, then I was tryin’ to wake you up.”

Ghost blinks.

“I wasn’t—”

Soap fixes him with a harsher frown, his eyebrows knitting together. “You definitely were, L.t. It was kinda terrifying.”



“You’re military,” Ghost reminds him. Despite Soap’s casual words, his hackles start to raise, like he’s a cornered animal and Soap’s the one with the gun. “Don’t tell me you don’t have fucked up dreams sometimes.”

“I never said I didn’t,” Soap reminds him. “But it seemed like you were having fuckin’ night terrors or somethin,’ sir.”

*Night terrors.*

Ghost’s face twists. He’s about to yank his hand off of Soap, mumble out an awkward apology, and book it for the exit when he feels the brush of fingertips against his wrist. Soap’s fingertips.

The other man wraps his hand around Ghost’s wrist, the one that’s loosely pressed to the base of his throat; not to wrench it off, but to hold it in place. Ghost’s mouth dries at the feeling of Soap’s hand resting on his skin.

*Christ, that would never grow old.*

“Johnny—”

“Must’ve been having a bad one,” Soap murmurs, hushed, even though they’re the only ones in his bedroom. “You kept...” he licks his lips and trails off.

Dread pools in Ghost’s stomach. “Kept what?” he asks.

“Kept calling out names,” Soap finishes, after a beat. “I didn’t catch them all, but, uh, you were repeating some.”

“What names?” Ghost asks, even though he already feels the answers etched deep into his bone marrow.

Soap studies his face for a moment longer, his hand tightening around Ghost’s wrist, before breathing out a quiet sigh.

“Tommy, Joseph, Beth,” Christ, those names coming from Soap’s mouth sound odd. Like he’s speaking underwater, words warbled and muffled. Soap swallows, his throat bobbing.

“Mum.” He finishes, quietly.

The silence that follows rings in Ghost’s ears.

*Tommy, Joseph, Beth, mum.*

He wonders how often he calls out for them in his sleep, defenses lowered and mouth pried open. He wonders if anyone's ever heard him.

He licks his lips, staring down at the man underneath him, wondering what to say in response.

Ghost swallows back a lump in his throat.

"Did I say your name too?" He asks, voice hoarse.

Soap blinks at him, before nodding slowly.

"Aye," he says. "Woke me up too. Thought you were calling out to me for help."

"In your dreams," Ghost quips back, dryly.

Soap cocks his eyebrow at him. "It was literally *your* dreams, L.t.," he says, though his voice is much more subdued than normal. He's still thinking about it, Ghost realizes. The names, the supposed night terrors, the "*Mum*" slipping free from Ghost's mouth.

Ghost watches the stray strand of hair that brushes Soap's forehead, unruly and beautiful.

"Simon," Soap calls him back to earth, a honing beacon. "Talk to me."

"What is there to talk about?" Ghost asks, tapping out a rhythm on Soap's throat. His fingernails brush over Soap's jugular for a beat and he briefly contemplates what it would be like to dig his nails into flesh and rip his jugular out, to admire up close.

He tightens his grip, ever so slightly at the thought.

Soap lets out a breath through his nose. The tips of his cheekbones are painted a rosy red.

"You tell me," he says, and despite everything, Ghost feels his mouth unlatching, ready to spill a wave of history that was never meant for John MacTavish's ears.

*"Simon, Simon, Simon—"*

He clamps his mouth shut.

"They were my family," he admits shortly, and it feels a little like

pulling teeth. His jaw aches.

Soap's fingers trace up the inside of his wrist, up to where his sleeve tattoos stain his skin with swirling designs and patterns. Ghost shivers at his touch, somehow both burning hot and chilled to the bone from it.

"I guessed," Soap whispers.

"What gave that away," Ghost attempts a lighthearted jab, but his voice refuses to lighten up from a graveled whisper, choked with some foreign emotion. "Was it the 'mum?'"

Soap's fingers circle a cigarette burn scar on the inner corner of Ghost's wrist. The pad of his finger, callused from years of holding a pistol, burns against the old scar. Ghost wants it everywhere.

"Simon," Soap says.

It's an invitation, a chance to let up some of the weight on his shoulders. It's just his bloody name in some man's bloody mouth.

But it's not that at all.

Ghost's stomach clenches.

He thinks of the shut door, the crimson red bleeding through the cracks, and Soap pleading with him to meet his family. He thinks of corpses in their Sunday best and four pairs of hands reaching for him in the shadows. What was there to say?

*Nothing good is waiting on the other side.*

A laugh interrupts his thoughts.

The twins are awake, Ghost can make out them zipping through the house—Maisie's louder footfalls and Blake's gentle, quiet steps. If he strains hard enough, he thinks he can hear Rebecca chasing after them, Sarah in the living room, and David and Lorraine padding around in the kitchen.

He looks down at Soap.

Soap, who's warm underneath his hand, and beautiful.

"Do you love them?" Ghost wants to ask, but he would be stupid to. He knows the answer.

Soap, because he's impossible, inexplicable even, looks back up at him.

"Your family," He says. "Tell me about them."

*"Do you love yours?"* His eyes seem to ask what his mouth doesn't. *Can you love mine?*

Blake giggles, his voice like windchimes and Christmas bells, and Ghost blinks his musings away.

"Sorry for waking you," he says and withdraws his hand. Soap's hand lingers on his for a beat, before dropping too.

It's strange loving Soap.

Ghost had always known he cared for the other man, to the point of deep infatuation, bordering on unhealthy obsession, but this? He wonders when *this* started veering toward love.

Yet it could be nothing but love: Bone deep, aching, and saccharine sweet enough to send waves of nausea reeling in Ghost's stomach. There was nothing else in the world, no other feeling, quite like being in love with Soap.

"Simon," Soap calls out to him, and Ghost stops wondering. Soap smirks at him, the curve of his mouth perfect and pink, just begging to be kissed.

Ghost would beg to kiss them.

"Daydreamin' about me?" Soap asks, coyly, like he's a mind reader. He's somehow already forgiven Ghost for his morning transgressions, though the look in his eye shows that he hasn't quite forgotten. "Why dream when you have the real thing right here, beautiful?"

"Horrible line, John," Rebecca calls out, from where she's sprawled on the floor with her children. "Five out of ten." A plethora of crayons and papers spread out around the three, like scattered offerings to a trio of gods.

“That’s generous, Becca,” Sarah snorts from her perch on the sofa.  
“Three out of ten.”

“Ten!” Maisie calls out.

“I don’t remember asking for a ranking from ye cows,” Soap snaps.  
“Not you, Mais.”

Ghost leans back in his seat.

A sudden rainstorm had hit town a few days after their deer-seeking expedition, and he and the MacTavishes had all but been cooped up in the home.

Now, as rain patters against the windows in a thunderous beat, Ghost finds himself in the sitting room with Soap’s sisters, nephew, niece, and Soap himself. Rebecca and her children coloring together while Sarah scrolls aimlessly on her computer, the television crooning low in the background.

Soap, antsy with nothing to do, had roped Ghost into a card game (his sisters had refused to play on the count that Soap was a dirty cheat, something the rest of the 141 would wholeheartedly agree with) and Ghost had gone along with it.

Though, it had been hard to pay attention to beating his opponent, when all he could think about was his opponent’s hands, their sinewy strength, and the way his opponent’s brow furrowed when he was thinking of his next move.

“You’re shit at cards,” Soap tells him now, as he places his winning hand on the table between them. His smile is victorious, vicious, and Ghost’s vice.

“You’re a cheater,” Ghost replies back and the other man affronts a mock offended look.

“Me? I would never,” Soap splays a hand over his chest, like a Victorian woman swooning in shock. “I’m an honorable man.”

Ghost snorts. “Show me your sleeve,” he gestures to Soap’s long sleeves covering up to his wrists. “Bet you have an extra deck up in there.”

“I’m no magician,” Soap says, though the glint in his eyes is enough of an answer. “But you can come over here and pat me down if you

want, doll.”

Ghost’s pulse jumps.

“That an invitation?” He asks, through a lump in his throat. He leans forward, swaying at the sheer weight of Soap’s eyes on his.

“Maybe,” Soap leans forward as well. “Gonna take me up on the offer?”

“Maybe,” Ghost parrots back, low and amused. “If you’re good.”

Soap’s eyes flash, all lightning and thunder. They’re closer now than ever before. Soap’s hand slides on top of his own resting on the table, his fingers dancing over Ghost’s bruised knuckles.

“And if I’m not?”

Ghost feels his lips quirk.

“You will be,” he says. “You like being good for me, don’t you, Johnny?”

As Soap’s face floods bright red, Ghost grabs Soap’s wrist and reaches into his sleeve. Sure enough, he fishes out three cards, tucked away by Soap’s deft fingers.

Ghost withdraws and flashes the cards in front of the other’s face.

“So I was right,” he says, and Soap blinks.

“Three cards is not an “extra deck,” he argues, the red on his face starting to fade.

“These three cards are proof that you’re a cheater.”

“You planted fake evidence on me. You’re a sore loser, my boyfriend is such a sore loser.”

Ghost resists the urge to laugh.

“Jesus wept.”

Their heads swivel around to see Soap’s sisters watching them with interest. Rebecca’s smile looks eerily Cheshire Cat in nature while Sarah’s grin is smaller, but no less amused.

“What?” Soap asks them.

“Nothing,” Rebecca shrugs. “Just glad to see that Ghost knows you play dirty.”

“I don’t play dirty,” Soap corrects, reshuffling his cards. “I play like a gambler.”

“You play like a liar,” Sarah comments, though she sounds lighthearted enough.

Nevertheless, Soap stiffens.

Ghost sees the tension in his shoulders, chain-mail armor winding around his body in a protective embrace. *A liar*, his sister had called Soap in front of his fake boyfriend.

She doesn’t know the half of it.

“And yet, he still won,” he cuts in, before he can stop himself.

The MacTavishes turn to him, their gazes boring into him.

Ghost looks to the side. He’s wearing his mask today, pulled up enough to reveal his mouth and chin, but still a barrier from the eyes of Soap’s family. True to Soap’s word, his family hadn’t said a peep about it—not even the kids.

He tries not to wonder about what Soap said to them to make them so quiet.

His stomach turns.

“I would have expected you to defend my brother’s honor, not agree with us,” Rebecca says to him, teasingly. “Sarah and I are bad influences on you.”

He wonders when Rebecca had begun to speak to him like that, lilting and biting all at once. It almost sounds like how she speaks to her siblings, to the rest of her family.

*Almost.*

Too close for comfort.

“I won’t defend something that doesn’t exist,” Ghost says, dryly, just to keep sudden nausea at bay.

“Oi, say it to my face, doll, I’m right here,” Soap complains, lightly, though his voice has an edge to it.

“You’re not an honorable man,” Ghost says, and watches the hurt flash over Soap’s face, if only for a beat. His heart aches in response, condemning him for causing that look. But it’s true, for as good as Soap is, he’s still a liar, a killer, and a soldier.

Soap isn’t an honorable man; like the sky isn’t green, and grass isn’t blue.

Maisie drops her crayon and stands.

“Can we play hide and seek?” She asks, loudly, and Soap’s eyes drop away from Ghost.

“Aye, Mais,” he says.

When she looks to him, expectant, Ghost nods too.

She grins at him like Ghost just gifted her the best present in the world. Blake, always hidden behind his sister, matches her smile. His chest pangs something awful.

“Maw’s the seeker,” she announces.

“Objection,” Rebecca drawls. When Maisie pouts up at her, Rebecca affectionately flicks her daughter’s forehead. “Aye, aye, Sarah and I are it.”

Her children cheer, gleeful, as she eyes the rainy weather outside.

“Remember,” she tells them, sternly. “You cannae hide outside. Inside only.”

They nod and Rebecca fixes Maisie with a frown.

“I mean it. It’s pissing out doon there. Dinnae go outside.”

Maisie sighs, but after some rather enthusiastic elbows to the ribs by her brother, she nods. “Aye, Maw.”

Sarah begins counting down.

Ghost turns to say something to Soap, but the other is standing, eyes fixed on his family.



"If memory serves," he taunts his sisters, in favor of his nephew and niece, who giggle away at his side. "You two are awful seekers."

His sisters both hurl insults back at him, as equally affectionate as stinging in nature. Soap laughs back, basking in their words.

He doesn't look back at Ghost.

Ghost stands, hidden in a closet, and wonders how his life came to this.

He has hidden in places before, but it was for life-threatening, high-stakes scenarios. Someone's life was always on the line, whether it be his or the other person's. There have been always quite a bit more guns and blood involved.

He stands there, feeling awfully stupid, and waits for Soap's sisters to find him and end his misery.

The option to just up and leave had crossed his mind, several times. In fact, he hadn't even planned on really hiding, just tucking himself into a bathroom, but Blake had seized his hand while the countdown had started, and all but dragged him down the hall to the coat closet.

Ghost had let himself be pulled, bewildered.

"This is your hiding space," Blake had declared. "It's the best in the entire world."

"Really," Ghost had looked at the coats and back at the boy, who was nodding furiously. "Then, you hide here," he had said. "And I'll find somewhere else."

Blake had looked suspicious at that, like he didn't trust Ghost not to be competent enough to find his own hiding space and not get caught. Ghost had been a little miffed.

Before he could just walk away, Blake had shaken his head.

"No, you stay here," he had instructed, gravely. "I'll go upstairs."

"What a kind sacrifice," Ghost had said, not as dryly as he would have liked. At Blake's pointed look, he had tucked himself into the closet.

"Promise," Blake had said, before he could shut the door. The little boy's eyes had been narrowed. "Stay."

Ghost had looked him for a beat, before nodding.

"Okay," he had rasped. "I'll stay."

Blake had grinned, brilliant and bright, and dashed off, leaving Ghost behind, questioning his life choices.

He stays, but his patience is not abundant, especially in situations as unserious as this. Ten minutes pass, and Ghost has half the mind to leave the closet, when the door slides open—making the decision for him.

As he steps forward, ready to call out to Rebecca or Sarah, another body comes tumbling into the closet.

His eyes adjust to the sudden influx of bright light and he sees...Soap.

Soap.

Soap who's trying to bite back his laughter as he grins at someone behind him.

"This is my hiding spot," he whisper-shouts.

He turns, joy still radiant on his face, before catching sight of Ghost.

Soap freezes.

"L.t.—" he coughs, before the door slides open further, and Maisie pops her head in.

"Oh, okay!" She says. "You hide with Ghost, Uncle John!"

Ghost wants anything but that.

"Be quiet," Maisie commands them. "Don't let them catch you."

"Uh," He starts.

"Wait," Soap says.

“Bye!” Maisie whispers and disappears.

And then, there’s just him and Soap. In a closet together.

Ghost reaches for the door, ready to just walk out, when Soap beats him to the punch. Yet, instead of up and leaving, he steps into the closet and shuts the door firmly behind him.

The light leaves them, shrouding the room in pitch darkness.

“What are you doing?” Ghost hisses.

“Hiding,” Soap shoots back. “Because we’re playing fuckin’ hide and seek.”

The closet is hardly big enough for the both of them, two grown adult men squashed together, and Soap’s nose is inches away from Ghost’s neck, his forehead almost bumping against Ghost’s nose.

“We can’t both stay here,” Ghost argues, weakly.

Soap exhales, loudly, and a gust brushes over Ghost’s skin, sending goosebumps erupting all over Ghost’s arms. He can smell Soap’s ginger shampoo in all its potent glory. Strong and intoxicating enough to suffocate the strongest of men.

*Jesus. Fucking. Christ.*

“Then leave,” Soap says, so firmly, Ghost has no choice to obey.

He reaches for the door again, before he hears voices.

Soap’s hand flies to his arm, barring him from moving, and they wait, frozen still.

“So,” Rebecca’s voice carries as she heads down the hallway. “Where’s John?”

Blake sighs. “I won’t tell,” he says, stubbornly. So, she found him.

Rebecca mock-gasps. “No?” She asks. “Not even if I do this?”

She does something to make her son giggle, but still, he doesn’t say anything.

“Loyal,” Sarah’s voice follows next. “You’re one of a kind, wee man.”

Another exhale fans the base of Ghost's neck. Ghost glances down to where Soap must be—close enough to touch, to consume, to inhale—and clenches his jaw. His hand burns on Ghost's arm, branding him.

"She's not wrong," Soap whispers, more to himself than anything, yet Ghost nods.

"She's not," he says, quietly.

Soap exhales again, an agitated breath this time.

*Well, then.*

Ghost tilts his head back and lets it gently thud against the closet wall behind him. Distinctly, he gets the feeling that he said something so intangibly wrong, yet, before he can retract, the voices outside get louder.

"You sure you won't tell?" Sarah is asking.

"You'll never find Ghost," Blake says back, more confidently. "He's the best."

"We'll see about that. But we'll definitely find your sister. And John." Rebecca says, ominously to her son, before the voices and footsteps fade.

Ghost can't stop his own huff of amusement.

"What's so funny?" Soap asks, lightly, though there's something guarded in his tone. Barbed wire Ghost hasn't had the pleasure of cutting himself on before.

"Your nephew," Ghost replies.

And Blake *is* funny. Alarmingly smart too, and much too into sci-fi, animal facts, and legos. He's all but attached himself to Ghost after the deer trip, and Ghost has little heart to shake off his shadow.

"He's not joking," Soap murmurs, his words holding more heat than usual.

Ghost blinks.

"I know," he says.

"Then, why—"

Soap shifts, feet catching on something on the floor, and Ghost reaches out to steady him. Blindly, his hands fall on the curve of Soap's waist. The other man lets out a shaky breath, his own hand spasming on Ghost's arm, but he doesn't rebuke him.

*One of his greatest faults*, Ghost thinks.

"Why what?" He asks, softly.

His eyes have adjusted enough to the darkness that he can make out Soap's eyes glittering up at him, as well as the barest outlines of his pursed lips, the scruff of his jaw, and the slant of his nose.

Those eyes, blinking stars against an inky night sky, narrow. "Ghost," Soap says, and the sting of his callsign in Soap's mouth is enough to send a discomfiting shiver down Ghost's spine.

"Soap," Ghost replies.

"Do you think I'm a liar?"

Ghost cocks his head.

"You're lying right now," he says, after a beat. "You're lying to them about everything."

"Everything. Right." Soap pauses. "But does that make me a liar?"

"Are you having an existential crisis on me, Sergeant?" Ghost asks, nerves nipping at him.

"Humor me."

Ghost blows out a breath of air.

"Sometimes you are, MacTavish," he says. "Sometimes you're not. You're a liar about me, but you're living a truth because of it."

Soap swallows, low and rough enough that Ghost can feel the sound coursing through his own eardrums.

"Does that make me dishonorable?" he asks, and somehow, steps closer.

Their chests brush. Soap's hand travels from Ghost's arm to his shoulder, a gentle transition that Ghost trembles in time to.

“Yes,” he murmurs, when he stops shaking enough to formulate words. “But it’s not your worst fault. Far from it.”

Soap’s eyes flit away, jaw hardened.

“I always,” he shrugs, and Ghost feels his shoulders move, like he would feel his own. “I always thought I would be. Good. Just. A son with honor and pride and whatever the hell makes a man into a good son, brother, husband, father, whatever.”

“Trust me, you have pride,” Ghost corrects him. “Lots of it.”

Soap snorts and taps his fingers against Ghost’s clavicle. “Aye? And what do you have?”

*What makes you a good son?*

It’s Ghost’s turn to swallow back a lump. *Nothing*. He is the son of a phantom and a corpse, a brother of a memory with track marks and cocaine-filled noses, and an uncle of a pipe dream. *Nothing at all*.

His stomach turns and turns.

“Definitely not honor,” he forces out.

Soap laughs, though it sounds too dull to be real.

Ghost presses on.

“But who needs honor?” He asks the beautiful man before him, and Soap blinks. “You’re more without it than most men are with it.”

Soap’s perfect mouth parts.

Ghost wants to kneel before Soap’s feet and take his fingers into his own mouth.

*“The monks, the priests, the deities, and the heroes,”* He wants to say, fucking into Soap, deep and rough, all while holding a hand to his throat. *“Honor made them glorious, yet you outshine them all with nothing but your lies, cruelty, and blood-stained hands.”*

*“How do you do it?”* He wants to scream, bloody and raw, puncturing Soap’s organs with a rusted knife. *“Who are you to reduce me to this?”*

*“I love you,”* he wants to press kisses to Soap’s knuckles, leading him home from battle. *“I love you.”*

“I wouldn’t be here for an honorable man,” he whispers, instead. “I wouldn’t be here for anyone except for you.”

Soap stares at him.

Then his hands, large and warm, float to Ghost’s face and cradle him.

Ghost could die here, and he would leave the world as he came into it—terrified, vulnerable, and happy. He could. He could. He could.

“Can I—”

“Yes,” Ghost murmurs. “Yes, yes, yes.”

His chin lowers and brushes against Soap’s nose. Soap winds his arms around Ghost’s shoulders and Ghost digs his nails into Soap’s sides. He’ll float away, he’ll dissipate into the wind—along with his beautiful family—and Ghost will wake up on the floor of a cell somewhere.

He holds on tighter.

“Simon,” Soap whispers, their faces are inches away from each other, yet there’s no one around to watch. He doesn’t say sweetheart.

“Johnny,” Ghost parrots back, softly.

Their noses knock together.

“Tell me,” Soap murmurs, his lips just a breath away from Ghost’s own.

“Tell you what?”

“Tell me something I don’t know about you.”

Ghost tips forward, hands tightening on Soap, and their lips miss each other, by just a hair.

“Simon,” Soap rasps. All at once, he’s every tragic, well-meaning fool in Greek mythology: Patroclus, Penelope, Prometheus—much too beautiful, much too brave. “Simon, Simon, Simon—”

He registers the light first, spilling into the darkness.

He and Soap fly apart, yet Ghost can barely trudge up any embarrassment or awkwardness at being caught. A sense of loss floods him, overwhelming and sharp, as the shape that Soap took up in his

arms is now nothing but empty air.

“We weren’t,” Ghost starts.

“Nothing happened,” Soap squawks at the same time.

“Awrite,” David MacTavish says, slowly.

*Bloody fantastic.*

“We were playing hide and seek,” Soap blurts out. “With the yins.”

“John,” David starts.

“We were just winchin’,” Soap says, faster now. “We weren’t having, uh, sex.”

Ghost watches the curl on his forehead. Inexplicably, grief courses through him in waves.

“You have a room for that,” David starts, voice edging towards cold, though his gaze is fixed on Ghost only.

“For winchin’?” Soap stands straighter, and it’s only then that Ghost realizes that he’s taller than his father. Only by an inch or two, but it’s obvious. “I can kiss Simon anywhere I want.”

Before David can respond, a shriek pierces through the air.

## Chapter End Notes

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# sweetheart

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“It’s Blake and Maisie,” Lorraine says. Ghost doesn’t know where she manifested from, but suddenly she’s standing at her husband’s side, worry pinching her brow. “They’re—”

It’s strange how a few words coupled with a slight inflection in someone’s tone, can cause the room to drop fifty degrees in temperature.

Soap and his father’s gaze tear away from each other and toward Lorraine.

“They’re what?” David asks.

“What happened?” Soap’s voice overlaps with his father’s.

Another shout interrupts whatever Lorraine was going to say and it’s enough of an answer that Soap bolts towards the direction of the noise. Ghost follows along, his heart at his throat.

Soap skids to a stop and yanks the door to the garden open.

“Fuck me,” he breathes out, and Ghost peers around him. The rain is the first thing that catches his attention. It’s pouring from the sky in buckets, so intense that he and Soap are already soaked down to the bone. He wipes the water from his eyes and squints, scanning the garden for any potential threat.

Then, he sees it.

In the tree, near the far end of the garden, two very familiar figures are perched on the highest branches. Their dirty blonde hair whips around them and, even from a distance away, Ghost can make out matching pairs of wide, blue-green eyes.

Blake and Maisie.

“What the fuck,” he sputters. Incredulity and alarm render him stupid

for a split second, enough to make him gawk like a newbie on the battlefield. “What the hell are your niece and nephew doing in a tree?”

“Good fuckin’ question,” Soap shouts over the rain, before taking off.

When they arrive at the base of the tree, Ghost only then notices that other people have already beaten them to the punch. Sarah is holding a rickety-looking ladder, a grim expression on her face. Rebecca is wringing her hands together and shouting something up at her children.

“Stay still!” Her normally lilting voice is sharp and almost as cold as the rain pelting them all. If Ghost strains his ears hard enough, though, he can make out the undercurrent of fear beneath all that ice. “I’m coming to get you!”

“It’s too dangerous to use the ladder,” Sarah whispers, just loud enough for the adults to hear. “You could fall.”

“My children could fall!”

“Oi,” Soap cuts through his sisters’ conversations. “Sarah’s right, Rebecca. You’ll break your fuckin’ neck on that thing.”

“John—”

Rebecca looks right about to switch from wringing her hands to wringing her brother’s neck, but Soap continues. “It’s too dangerous for any of us to try to climb up. The rain could cause any of us to fall and the branches may not be able to take any extra weight without snapping off. They could fall too.”

Rebecca’s face pales. “What the fuck do we do, then?”

“I’ve rung the fire department,” Lorraine says. She and David have joined the commotion and both have their phones pressed to their ears, like lifelines.

“They might not be here in time,” Sarah counters. “We need to do something now. What if they slip—”

“Maw!”

Their gazes snap up.

Maisie stares back down at them. She’s clutching the branch she’s

stuck on, one hand gripping onto the rain-soaked surface the best she can. Her other hand, however, is firmly holding onto her brother's.

Her brother who practically radiates fear, from his eyes squeezed shut and locked limbs. Frozen in place.

"Maw!" Maisie screams.

"Maisie," Rebecca shouts back. "Maisie, baby, stay still."

"Maw, it's Blake. He's not moving!"

All hell breaks loose at her words. Rebecca moves toward the tree, like she might start scaling up the thing with nothing but her bare hands and pure determination. Sarah holds onto her elbow. They shout at each other, over each other to the twins—words indistinguishable.

"John, is he okay?" David rumbles and Lorraine fumbles for her phone again, their faces pale. "Do we have to call the paramedics, John?"

"John!" Rebecca screams. Desperation turns her voice hoarse and some small part of Ghost aches hearing it. "John, help me!"

Soap starts toward his sister, but Ghost catches his wrist.

"L.t." Soap hisses. "Simon, let go."

He doesn't. Because he's selfish and doesn't want to see Soap's head cracked wide open on the ground like an overripe watermelon. Because he's worried about Blake and Maisie. Because of Sunday dinners, false hickies, and sleeping deer roe. He holds on tighter.

"You said it yourself," Ghost whispers back, quickly. "Climbing up there is more harm than good. For both you and the twins."

"We've survived much worse," Soap replies. "I've survived worse."

His eyes are frantic and fixed on the children. The rain mats his hair, turning it less into a mohawk and more of a wild mess. Ghost's fought countless times by his side on the battlefield and off of it, but he can't recall the last time the other man was this alarmed.

*I know.* Ghost thinks. *I know you have.*

"But they haven't," Ghost says back. Soap's eyes flicker back to him, raw emotions turning them molten and beautiful. Ghost doesn't look away. "Don't be a fuckin' hero, Johnny."

*Who needs honor? Not you, never you.*

Soap watches him for a moment longer, jaw artfully clenched, before turning back to his family. Ghost doesn't know what to make of his silence, so he doesn't.

"Blake!" Sarah and Rebecca are shouting up at the boy. David and Lorraine are calling out to him too, and their collective voices create a cacophony of noise almost as loud as the thunder that rumbles in the sky. "Are you okay? How are you feeling?"

"He's in shock," Ghost shouts over his family's chaos. "He's not hurt, not physically at least."

They don't calm down, necessarily, but their attention shifts more toward him and a little less on the petrified boy. Ghost exhales. *Good.*

"What do we do?" Rebecca asks, her chin quivering. "He must be terrified." Soap puts a hand on her shoulder and turns to face the rest of the adults.

"They need to jump," he says. "Ghost and I'll catch them."

He meets Ghost's eyes, then.

"I will," Ghost promises. "We will."

They're supposed to catch Maisie together.

She, however, has other plans.

"No," she screams. Ghost tries not to flinch, but Christ, the girl is *loud*.

"Mais," Soap tries to placate her. "C'mon, it may seem scary—"

"It's not scary," Maisie interrupts. She grips Blake's hand tighter. "I'm not leaving him alone."

"Mais," Soap says, roughly. "I understand, I do, but you have to jump

down first. Then, we can help Blake.”

“We can help you both,” Ghost adds. “Let us.”

Maisie stares down at them, hair whipping around her face. Then, her eyes dart back to her petrified brother.

She shakes her head.

“Fuck,” Soap hisses through his teeth. He glances back at Ghost, a brittle smile on his face. “Still against me climbing up the tree, L.t.?”

“Very.”

Before Soap can respond, Maisie shouts back down from the tree.

“Can we both jump?”

Ghost’s eyebrows shoot up. “At the same time?”

“Uncle John can catch me,” Maisie says, her eyes never leaving Blake’s face. “And Ghost can catch you, Blake. Okay?”

Ghost blinks.

“Maisie!” Soap shouts. “I dinnae ken if—”

Maisie ignores them.

“She’s crazy,” Soap breathes out. “She’s aff her heid.” He looks at Ghost accusingly.

“She’s *your* niece,” Ghost replies. Then, he feels his throat go dry.

It’s the slightest of movements, so quick that anyone could miss it. But Ghost doesn’t.

Blake nods.

Maisie sees it too, and it’s enough to cement her already stubborn will. She squeezes her brother’s hand again and looks back down at Soap and Ghost.

“Catch me,” she says, like it’s simple. “Catch him, Uncle Ghost.”

It’s a command, as much as it’s a plea. She says it like Soap, not so long ago, asking him to be his fake boyfriend. She says it like Sarah,

asking him to keep her brother safe. She says it like a goddamn MacTavish, and Ghost is nothing but weak to the demands of the MacTavishes.

Soap exhales.

“Mais,” he starts, pained at having to refuse his niece of something.  
“We ca—”

“Okay. On my count or yours?” Ghost asks.

It’s almost comical how fast Soap’s head whips back to him.

“Don’t mess around, Simon.”

Ghost cocks his head. “Never said I was.”

Soap gapes.

“What happened to not being a hero?” He asks, incredulous.

“We’re not being heroes,” Ghost replies. “We’re probably endangering them even more by not waiting for the firefighters and letting them free-fall out of a tree together.” For a split second, he wonders if he’s being too crass, especially in a crisis pertaining to Soap’s family.

Then, he catches a glimpse of Soap’s grin. Even in a situation as tense as this, that smile is luminous and enough to warm Ghost up from the inside out.

“You’re such a liar sometimes, L.t.”

“Not any more than you,” Ghost reaches out, bracing himself for Blake’s weight. “On my count?”

He can feel Soap’s eyes on him for a split second longer, before the other man readies himself as well.

“On your count.”

Ghost counts down and the twins jump.

It happens so quickly; one moment Ghost's entire body is tensed, anticipating the inevitable impact of Blake, and in the next moment, the boy is there. The sudden collision sends both him and Soap buckling, but David and Lorraine place their hands on Ghost's back to steady him while Soap's sisters do the same for him.

It's the briefest of touches—there one moment and gone the next—but foreign hands on him still send Ghost's skin crawling.

For now, he can overlook it.

Because Blake is holding onto him, shaking and soaked all over, but otherwise okay.

"Hey," Ghost whispers and wonders when his voice became so scratchy. It grates against Ghost's own eardrums, but Blake only burrows closer at the sound. "Blake."

The boy cracks his eyes open.

"Ghost," he whispers, and something loosens in Ghost's chest.

He brushes blonde ringlets away from the boy's face, before he can stop himself.

"Ghost," Blake repeats, and tears well up in his eyes. "I couldn't—"

Ghost's eyes drift down to Blake's shirt pocket. There's a lump in it and Blake reaches in, with trembling hands. He pulls out something small and holds it tenderly in his fist.

*A ball? But it has a weird texture...*

"What—"

"Blake!" Rebecca swoops in and sweeps her son into her arms. She holds him and Maisie close to her chest. "You're awrite!"

Ghost steps back, giving them privacy, and looks toward Soap.

Who's already looking at him with a strange expression. A flush rises to Ghost's face at the sight, so familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. He *knows* what this look means, he's thought about it, dreamed about it, yearned for it—

"Ghost."

Blake tugs on his shirt, apparently having slipped free from his mother's grasp for a second.

Ghost crouches down.

"What is it, little man?"

Blake opens his palm and Ghost gets a good look at what he was holding before. Not a weird, feathery ball, but a bird. A baby bird with feathers of brown and gold.

"I tried to put him back," Blake whispers. "Maisie saw him fall from the nest and I wanted to put him back."

Ghost runs a finger alongside the back of the bird. The body under his finger stays unmoving and cold.

Tears drip from Blake's eyes, but valiantly maintains eye contact with Ghost. "Is he dead?" He asks.

He thinks of his father, nonlethal blows to the head, and a very lethal blade pressed into his hand. He thinks of what his father would say to this little boy. He thinks of what he himself would say to green, wide-eyed recruits.

He finds the words sticking to the roof of his mouth.

Soap comes to his rescue.

"Yes," he says, softly to his nephew. "He's dead." Ghost wonders where all that softness comes from and where it all goes when they're on the battlefield. He wonders until he feels bile rise in his throat.

"Do you want to bury him?" David asks, this time, coming up to stand beside his grandson. "So he can go to heaven?"

Blake nods and Ghost turns away.

When he was five, Simon's father had taken him hunting.

He had put a gun in Simon's hands and told him to pull the trigger.



For a split second, Simon wanted to press the barrel of the hunting rifle to his father's gut and follow through with his commands. Even at five, he knew what he wanted.

Instead, he pointed it at the sky and fired.

He fired until a bird of somewhat-decent size fell prey to his shots. His father dragged him back, dismayed at his son's poor excuse for hunting.

"No son of mine," he grumbled from the driver's seat. "Can't even fuckin' hold a gun."

Simon picked at his smiley-face bandaid, something he had gotten from the school nurse when he had skinned his knee. He wondered how mad his father would get if he threw up in the car. He thought about unfinished homework, Sunday cartoons, and mac and cheese.

Then, he dreamed about killing his father, mother, and brother; then growing a pair of wings and leaving forever. In his dreams, he flew toward the sun and plummeted back down the ocean, before starting all over again.

All the while, a golden and brown bird bled out on his lap, all over his uniform shorts, and stained his knees red.

After a lengthy scolding and lengthier hugs, the twins are sent to bed and everyone else retires to the sitting room.

"Jesus fucking wept," Rebecca breathes out and Ghost can't help but resonate deeply with that sentiment. Sarah and Soap echo her words before a tense silence blankets the room.

After another minute or so, Soap's parents disappear into the kitchen and return with glasses and a bottle of wine. Rebecca looks about ready to fall to her knees and prostrate herself in front of her parents.

"This is a good bottle," Soap mutters, studying the bottle.

"Shut up and enjoy the free wine," Sarah whispers.

"I think we deserve it tonight," Lorraine replies.

They all accept the wine with a little too much enthusiasm and soon, conversation is flowing as easily as it ever has.

"You saved him," Rebecca says to him, when she's a few glasses past tipsy, and Ghost tries not to choke on his wine.

"I didn't—"

"You did," she interrupts, so alike her daughter it's almost enough to make a smile curve on Ghost's face. Almost. "You saved my son. Thank you."

Ghost coughs and looks away from her earnest gaze. Unfortunately, this means making eye contact with Sarah. Soap's younger sister apparently takes it as a cue to move closer and join the conversation.

Ghost distinctly feels trapped. He wills Soap to come and save him, but the other is wrapped in a conversation with his parents and Ghost is left floundering. Cornered.

"Thank you," Sarah says. Before Ghost can dismiss her thanks for saving Blake, she adds: "For stopping John."

Ghost blinks.

"For stopping Johnny?"

"He might have gotten hurt if you didn't stop him," Sarah says. "Did you know that he sprained his wrist climbing that tree when he was seven? I don't trust that he got any better at climbing since then."

Ghost swallows and looks down. He hadn't known.

"Oh, God," Rebecca sighs. "I forgot about that. Why haven't Maw and Dad gotten rid of that thing?"

"Because they like decorating it for Christmas," Sarah laughs. "So sentimental."

"But it's not a Christmas tree?" Ghost asks, before he can stop himself.

Sarah shakes her head. "Oh, you'll see, come Christmas. It's a whole *thing*."

"I cannae wait to see the look on your face when you hear Dad

recount the story, Ghost,” Rebecca laughs. “Ma, Sarah, and I have a betting pool for how we think you’ll react.”

“I bet that you would cry,” Sarah sips from her wine.

Ghost stands.

“I’m gonna get more...” he gestures feebly to his glass. Soap’s sisters smile at him and wave him off. As he walks off, he tries not to think about what they just said.

*Christmas.*

He tries even harder not to want it.

*Do they want him around for Christmas?*

Ghost pinches the bridge of his nose. He was doing nobody favors by lingering on some silly joke, least of all himself. In a few short days, he and Soap would be heading back to the 141, and Ghost would be nothing more than an anecdote for the MacTavishes to reminisce over the dinner table. The strange ex-boyfriend who had a tragic past and wore skull masks just for the hell of it.

Maybe they would even tell Soap’s future children, if Ghost was lucky enough to exist in their memory for so long.

Their farce would be over soon.

He fills his glass with more wine.

As the night dwindles on, they retire to their respective bedrooms.

Ghost pops outside for a quick smoke, trying not to think about Christmas and trees, and the familiar fragrance of ginger and home. He returns to the bedroom to find that Soap had turned on that stupid record player of his and a popular song from the 90s was now floating through the air.

The culprit himself is standing near the window. His shirt is still damp

and there's a leaf stuck in his hair. Ghost wonders if he'll ever stop finding Soap utterly breathtaking. He hopes he never does. He hopes he dies with this awe still alive and thriving in his decaying chest.

Soap catches him staring.

He raises his eyebrows like *come hither*.

So Ghost goes.

He's within arm's reach of Soap, when the other man gets to him first. Soap's fingers, thick and scarred, cinch the belt loops of his jeans and tug until Ghost finds himself pressed chest to chest to the other. Soap smirks up at him, the uptick of his mouth a pretty little thing.

"There you are," he whispers.

"Here I am," Ghost replies. "Missed me?"

Soap tugs on Ghost's belt loops again, more teasingly this time.

"Maybe. What would you say if I did?"

"I'd say you're developing a bit of an obsession."

Soap's tongue wets his lips. Ghost stares at the devastating aftermath of that little action, unmoored.

"I think you've got it the other way around, doll."

Soap's fingers unhook from his belt loops and trail up-up-up until his hands rest on Ghost's abdomen. His touch is so warm, Ghost can feel it through the thin layer of his shirt.

"I think you're obsessed with me," Soap murmurs the truth like it's nothing. His eyes spark conspiratorially and Ghost's knees almost buckle under the weight of it all.

"Yet, you're the one feeling me up," he manages.

Soap laughs and presses his palms harder down on Ghost's abs, almost like he's testing his strength. Ghost doesn't budge, only cocks his head at the other and raises his brows.

"I'm checking something," Soap says, cheekily. He doesn't withdraw, so neither does Ghost.

“Yeah?” Ghost asks.

“Yeah,” Soap responds. Then, his teasing tone fades somewhat. “Blake landed on you pretty hard. I wanted to see if you were hurt. Bruised up.”

*You can bruise me up*, Ghost wants to say.

He silences that tiny voice in his head.

“It wasn’t too bad. Were you worried?” Ghost asks. “Were you worried that I wouldn’t catch him?”

“No,” Soap responds. “I knew you would.”

He wets his lips again and looks to the side. “I was worried about you,” he says, after a beat.

Ghost frowns. “I wasn’t the one stuck up in that tree.”

“That would have been a sight,” Soap snorts. “Am I not allowed to be worried about you?”

No.

Ghost doesn’t know.

“I’m also your personal medic,” Soap continues. “Remember? I patched up your battle wound in the bathroom. It’s my job to be worried about you.”

“How could I forget,” Ghost responds and thinks of lips against skin. He eyes the base of Soap’s throat. “I thought army medics were supposed to be good at bandaging cuts.”

“I’m new,” Soap jokes, though there’s a light flush dusting his cheeks.

Emboldened, Ghost reaches up and touches Soap’s hands, which are still flush against his abdomen.

“In that case,” he says, bringing up Soap’s hands to rest on his chest. “Here.”

Soap wiggles his eyebrows up at him. “Oh? Dinnae ken you were that kinda lad.”

Ghost feels his lips twitch up.

“Focus. Can you feel my heartbeat?” he asks, lightly. “Am I on the brink of death, *Doc* ?”

Soap blinks up at him, his eyelashes fanning the delicate skin under his eyes.

Ghost places his own hand on top of Soap’s, his palm against Soap’s knuckles, Soap’s near-fresh wounds against Ghost’s old scars. He presses Soap’s hand down, till he swears, he can feel the thump of his own heart through the other’s palm.

“C’mon,” Ghost says. “Tell me.”

Soap breaks eye contact to glance down at their hands on Ghost’s chest.

“You’re alive,” he murmurs, eventually.

*Because of you. All for you, all because of you.*

“So, don’t worry about me,” Ghost says. He brushes his thumb alongside Soap’s battered knuckles. Their noses nudge one another, almost as if in greeting. “I mean it, Johnny.”

“Just try to stop me,” Soap murmurs. His breath is hot against Ghost’s skin. “You can’t.”

With that, Soap leans in and kisses him.

His mouth is rough and sweet under Ghost’s, a dichotomy of demanding and gentle. He’s a king, a god, and he has the world at his fingertips. He has Ghost on a leash and Ghost needs him to *yank*. When Soap licks into his mouth, with a twist of his tongue, Ghost nearly collapses on the spot.

It’s fucking *everything*.

Something like a whimper falls from his lips and he can feel Soap’s canines brush against his tongue.

“Fuck,” he hears Soap whisper, rough and low.

Suddenly, there are hands on his hips, on his chest, everywhere. He thinks he might burn up from the sole amount of pressure everywhere, gravity and kisses pressing in on him; like he's Atlas and Soap is the world.

Soap rocks their hips together and Ghost shivers.

Soap nips at his jaw, stubble brushing against sensitive skin. "Simon," he murmurs and the sound goes straight to Ghost's cock. "Simon, I—"

Ghost threads his fingers with the short hair at the base of Soap's neck and *pulls* his head back.

Soap goes without a fight, his head lolling back to meet Ghost's stare. His eyes are... *Fucking Christ*, Ghost wants to consume them, wants to drown in them. He wants them on him forever. They stay watching each other, panting, before Soap reaches out.

He hooks a finger around the dog tags around Ghost's neck and *tugs*.

Ghost's cock jumps at that and Soap grins.

"What did you say before?" He asks. "About treating you like a dog and yanking you around on a chain?"

Ghost slots a leg in between Soap's legs and grinds up, harsh and unforgiving on the other's clothed crotch. "I said not to do it," he rasps. "Seems like you forgot." Soap lets out a moan that borders on the edge of a laugh.

"Seems like you like it," he says and yanks harder on Ghost's chain.

Loosening a noose or pulling it tight, Ghost can't tell. He doesn't give two shits. "Maybe," he allows, before leaning back in and capturing Soap's lips into another kiss.

He ends up pressing Soap to a wall, so reminiscent of their bathroom hickey position. Except this time... This time, Soap's mouth is scraping against his own, sharp teeth cutting into his bottom lip. Ghost ruts his hips against Soap's, tentatively at first, before Soap is tugging on his dog tags again—sharp and insistent.

"Harder," he demands, eyes bright. He looks fucked out already. He looks fucking dangerous. He hooks his leg around Ghost's hips and draws him closer. "Faster."

“Look at you,” Ghost murmurs, feeling lightheaded. “Spreading your legs for me.” He grabs Soap’s thigh and *digs* his nails into the flesh. Soap mewls in response, eyes rolling back.

They rut together like a pair of rabid animals, Soap holding onto Ghost and Ghost trying not to rip Soap into shreds. His free hand floats to Soap’s exposed neck. He hovers above it, not touching, not pressing down. He wonders, he wonders, he—

“Baby,” Soap whispers through his terrible, terrifying, perfect kisses. “Simon, I love you.”

Then, all at once, the weight of the world *crushes* Ghost alive.

He pulls away, lungs gasping for air and lips stinging.

“Simon?” he can hear Soap asking.

He can feel Soap clutching onto his wrist—an anchor, a ball and chain. Suddenly, he thinks John MacTavish may be both the sun and a pair of wax wings. He doesn’t know which god assigned Ghost the role of Icarus, but he thinks they might be the cruelest force of nature.

*I love you. I love you. I love you.*

He doesn’t know if it’s the truth or a slip of the tongue; It doesn’t matter. He’s losing either way.

“Simon, what’s wrong?”

Ghost shakes his head and goes to stand. His stomach reels.

“Simon!” he hears Soap say. “Are you okay?” He’s still holding onto Ghost’s hand.

“John,” Ghost says and feels his ribs crack in two. “Sweetheart, let go.”

## Chapter End Notes

this chapter really resonates with me because i recently got stuck on a tree

come say hi on  
[tumblr](#)



# the great war

## Chapter Notes

**tw for a panic attack**

starts at:

**“I-I dinnae want to,” he sobs.**

and ends at

**“Has this ever happened before?”**

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He manages to get all the way downstairs—past the bathroom with the aloe plant, the coat closet, the kitchen—and nearly makes it to the exit. *Nearly.*

He’s haphazardly pulling his boots on with one hand and reaching for the doorknob with the other; when he hears the familiar fall of feet behind him.

“Ghost?” A voice calls out, but even without his voice, Ghost can tell who stands just behind him.

“Blake,” he responds, voice far too hoarse and strained around the edges. He exhales for a second, then three, before turning around to face Blake. The little boy blinks up at him, golden hair tousled and eyes heavily lidded with sleep.

“What are you doing?” he asks. The lilt of his words is light and unaccusing; yet Ghost’s shoulders rise of their own accord, hackles raising at being caught.

*'Yeah, caught running away like a bloody fucking coward,'* the bitter thought crosses his mind.

"What are *you* doing?" Ghost asks instead. Immediately, Blake freezes like a deer in the headlights.

"Nothing."

Ghost raises an eyebrow.

"It's nothing," Blake responds, a little stronger this time. Still, his eyes dart away from Ghost's gaze and down the hallway. The hallway that leads to the garden door.

"That's not a good idea," Ghost says, dryly.

"What?"

Ghost scrubs a hand across his face; he briefly commends Rebecca for having to deal with the shenanigans of the twins on a daily basis. She must have the patience of a goddamn saint.

"Sneaking out to the garden," he clarifies. It really isn't any of his business what Blake does or doesn't do, but for Christ's sake, he had *just* saved the kid from that tree that very night. "That's a bad idea."

Blake goes rigid, but he doesn't back down. "I wasn't sneaking out. I-I was just gonna...uh—" A fierce blush spreads across his face. "I was gonna—"

"Climb that tree again?" Ghost finishes for him. "Your mum's gonna have a fit."

"Are *you* sneaking out?" Blake asks, suddenly. "Where's Uncle John?" His tone takes on a partially defensive, partially questioning tone that Ghost wants to flee from. He sets his jaw.

"Johnny's sleeping," he replies. Then, after a beat: "And I'm not sneaking out." His tone takes on a bit of sharpness, his temper acting as a whetstone for the familiar blade of callousness. He's never taken this tone with Blake before and the other looks suitably abashed at it.

He scuffs his socked toe against the wooden floor, cheeks flushing red.

"Oh," he murmurs. "Well. I-I wasn't gonna climb the tree. I promise I wasn't."

*Great, now he was going to make Soap's nephew cry.*

Ghost bites his tongue and wills for an unknown force to sock him right in the face. He glances back at the front door behind him. It would be so easy to just *leave*, and yet...

And somehow, his eyes find Blake again.

The little boy tugs nervously at the end of his jumper which has a cartoon of an almost freakish-looking green creature on it—a wrinkly abomination with too-big eyes and floppy ears. Ghost briefly wonders who in their right mind would ever make, much less wear, an article of clothing with something that hideous on it. The cartoon animal stares back at Ghost.

The front door is less than a foot away and Blake is farther.

“Are you,” Ghost rubs the back of his neck. “Are you thirsty?”

Blake asks for a glass of milk, which Ghost is silently grateful for.

He doesn't know what he would do if the little boy had asked Ghost to make something that would require him to rifle through the MacTavishes' cabinets, like some fucked up raccoon, in the dead of night. He doesn't want to think about how Soap would react to *that*.

He slides the cup over to Blake, who takes it.

“Thank you,” he says, though he still doesn't meet Ghost's eyes.

“You're welcome.”

There's a beat of silence as Blake takes tiny sips from his glass and Ghost picks at the dirt underneath his fingernails. He tries not to think about the weight of Soap's lips against his own, his teeth prying Ghost's mouth open like he was a predator and Ghost was his willing prey. He tries not to think about those three fatal words whispered in the shell of his ear. Fucking bloody Christ, he *really* tries.

“Ghost?”

Ghost hums, looking at his hands and pictures them wrapped around Soap's throat.

"I really wasn't going to climb the tree," Blake blurts out. "I swear, I wasn't. I just," he pauses and looks down, brow furrowed. "Dinnae ken."

"You don't know?" Ghost asks, leaning against the counter. "Really."

Blake clutches the glass tighter in his tiny hands. He mumbles something under his breath, so quiet that even Ghost can't pick it up. Ghost bites down the urge to tell Blake to speak up and stays quiet. Waiting.

"Did I kill him?" Blake asks.

Ghost blinks.

Blake's head hangs low as he speaks. "He was breathing when I was in the tree. The bird. He was shaking a lot, but he was breathing. But when I jumped—"

His voice breaks, then, but he doesn't look up—doesn't gratify Ghost or the empty kitchen with the sight of his tears. He swallows and keeps talking.

"When I jumped, I think I held on too tight. Maybe I held him wrong. But, then he wasn't shaking or breathing," Blake touches his chest with one hand, fingertips pressed against the beady eyes of the cartoon creature on his jumper. "His heart wouldn't—"

His shoulders tremble and the movement almost sends his entire body swaying, like a sapling in a thunderstorm. Some milk from his glass sloshes up and stains his jumper, but Blake doesn't seem to notice.

"I-I dinnae want to," he sobs. His breath becomes erratic and his words slur together. "I wanted to stay, I wanted to help, *I wanted*—"

Ghost touches the rim of the glass and lifts it from Blake's grasp. With his hands now free, the little boy digs them into his jumper, grabbing at the material harshly—as if he was about to rip it off his chest. He looks a little like he wants to claw them into his chest and dig out his heart.

Ghost's own dull heart thuds in response.

“Dinnae ken,” Blake snarls out, hoarsely, almost like a wounded animal. “I dinnae—”

*No son of mine.*

Ghost swallows and touches the rim of the milk glass, steadying it.

“I don’t know if you killed him,” He says. He wonders if he should be sugarcoating his words, assuring Blake that he wasn’t at fault and that it was nothing but an accident. He isn’t sure if he knows how to do that. So he doesn’t and plows on. “He might have been slowly dying the whole time. You might have killed him. We don’t know and we won’t know for sure.”

Blake snuffles and Ghost kneels down in front of him. At this new height, he can finally make out Blake’s wide, damp blue-green eyes.

“Here’s what I do know,” Ghost says. “I know that you’re not dead. I know that you don’t want to kill. I know that you’re kind. Want to know how I know?”

Blake stays quiet, breathing still a few paces too fast for comfort, but Ghost waits patiently for him to respond.

When the boy nods, Ghost asks: “Can I touch your hands?”

Blake nods again and Ghost takes Blake’s hands, unfurling them from their clenched fists, and splays one of them across the little boy’s chest.

“I know that you’re alive,” Ghost says. “Because your heart is beating.” He brings Blake’s other hand to his own chest and places it lightly over his own heart. “It’s beating like mine.”

Blake squeezes his eyes shut, but he presses down a little harder against Ghost’s chest and Ghost lets him.

“Mine’s faster,” Blake rasps, through panicked breaths.

“That’s how I know that you don’t want to kill,” Ghost continues, “because it’s beating this fast.” Ghost taps Blake’s chest. “You’re feeling like this because you hate it. If you loved what happened or didn’t care, you wouldn’t feel like you were having a goddamn heart attack, even though you’re not having one.”

Ghost inhales slowly.

"I know," he says, words so honest his teeth feel a little rotten. "I know that you're kind because of the deer."

"T-the deer?"

"The deer," Ghost repeats. "Many boys, many men, love looking for animals like you. But when they find these animals, they want to hurt them. When you find the animals, what do you want to do?"

"I want to," Blake swallows. "I just want to watch them."

"And I want to watch them with you," Ghost admits. The truth feels strange to admit, even stranger to hear spilling from his mouth. But he can't take it back, not when Blake is blinking up at him, his blue-green eyes bright and unclouded. "I wasn't like that before."

A cricket chirps outside the kitchen window and Ghost doesn't peel his gaze away from Blake's. He wouldn't, even if he wanted to.

"That's how I know you're kind." Ghost feels his mouth quirk into a shadow of a grin. "Yeah? So, breathe like me," he says. "Follow my lead, little man."

Blake wheezes, but slowly, he does. Soon, they're breathing in tandem and Blake is finally calming down.

"Has this ever happened before?" Ghost asks after a few long minutes of silence.

Blake nods. "Maw and Uncle John know how to help," he says. "And you do too."

Ghost nods back, unsure of what to say next.

He's formulating how to tell Soap about this whole encounter when he feels a sudden weight curling into him.

Blake, seemingly exhausted out of his mind, slumps against Ghost and wraps his arms around his neck. Ghost freezes at the sudden touch, alarm bells ringing in his brain at the feeling of an unfamiliar body and fragile bones. Blake breathes a sigh into Ghost's neck.

"Uncle Ghost," Blake whispers, delicate and heartwrenching all at once. "I'm tired."

"I'm not your uncle, Blake," Ghost manages. He wants to shove Blake off, he wants to hold him for a second longer. Fuck, he wants Soap to

be here so badly, he aches.

“Ah ken,” Blake burrows closer into Ghost and his words become muddled with sleep. “But I want you to be.”

Ghost is crouching on the floor of his fake boyfriend’s kitchen, holding up said fake boyfriend’s nephew made up of ringlets of gold and a heart of glass, and trying very hard not to move a muscle. He wonders how he got here. Very quickly, he realizes he doesn’t care.

“Me too,” he admits. His truth streak is on an all-time high tonight.

“Marry Uncle John,” Blake mumbles. “We can look for deer every time you come to visit.”

Ghost exhales. “It’s not that easy,” he admits, more roughly than he had intended.

“It is,” Blake insists. “You’ll make it easy.” He squeezes Ghost once, lightly, but Ghost can feel it all the way down to his bones. “So, stay.”

And with that command, he drifts asleep.

Ghost is just about to scoop the boy into his arms and bring him over to Rebecca’s room, but a soft noise behind him catches him off guard.

He whirls around, bracing Blake against him, and is met with Lorraine, looking back at him.

“Is he awrite?” Lorraine asks, her brow pinched in worry.

Ghost, in hushed tones, briefly describes what happened before. Lorraine nods when he’s finished, her face somber but not alarmed.

“Rebecca told me about this anxiety he has,” she admits. “I’ve never seen him shut down before.” She fixes her grandson with a sympathetic look. “He must be exhausted. Let’s get him to bed, aye?”

Ghost goes to pass a clingy, conked-out Blake to her, but she shakes her head.

“You’re much stronger than I am,” she says. “C’mon.”

They head over to where the twins’ room and tuck Blake in for the night. Blake clings on tighter to Ghost, in his sleep, fighting against the separation. Lorraine is of no help to his plight, smiling at her grandson’s stubbornness and Ghost’s exasperation. Eventually, though, Ghost pries the boy away and he and Soap’s mother end up in the sitting room.

“Ghost,” Lorraine turns to him, her eyes and the set of her jaw so much like Soap’s “Thank you for being with him.”

Ghost nods uncomfortably.

Lorraine continues. “I mean it. Shite, you’re so good with the weans.”

“They’re not hard to take care of,” Ghost replies, feeling an oddly defensive wave rise up in him, for some reason.

“They’re angels one day and devils the next,” Lorraine says.

She must see some sign of disagreement on his face, because she chuckles. “Just wait until your next visit. John’s begged us all to be on our manners, but those two especially. Their true colors will be revealed soon.”

“Somehow,” Ghost replies, as dryly as he can manage through the lump in his throat. “I think I’ll be able to handle it.”

“Somehow,” Lorraine echoes him. “I think you will. You’re strong, like my son. If he can handle it, so can you.” Her head tilts slightly, her hair peppered with grey cascading down the side of her face like a waterfall. “You make him different, eh?”

Ghost flushes. “What.”

“He wants to be a good man for you,” Lorraine presses her fingers to her lips, as if to hide her conspiratorial grin, and something about the action is so familiar and unfamiliar at the same time—it nearly stops Ghost’s heart.

Ghost swallows.

“He doesn’t have to be,” he says. “I don’t need Johnny to be a good man for me.”

“Then what do you need him to be?”



He shrugs.

*Himself.*

"Anything at all," is the only cryptic answer he can offer, but the look he receives for it is understanding.

"I was so worried," Lorraine says. "When John rang to say he was bringing someone home."

He stiffens.

"When I had weans, I never stopped to wonder what if any of them would be gay." There she said it, the word that all of them had been dancing around since the very beginning. Ghost sits a little straighter up in her chair. "Maybe it was easier not to wonder."

"Easier for who?" Ghost cuts in. "Because I can't imagine it was for Johnny."

Her smile fades. "Ah ken."

"I don't know if you do," Ghost says, because he can't stop himself. "I'm not sure if you ever will." He may be crossing these lines drawn in the sand, the barrier between family and fake boyfriend, but his mouth just won't clamp shut. He can't ever really seem to shut up when it comes to Soap, it seems.

Lorraine doesn't get mad, however. She merely nods, accepting his words for what they are.

"I'm sorry," is all she says, but something about those words sends a knot loosening in Ghost's chest.

"I'm not him," Ghost replies. "I'm not the one who needs to hear it."

"Awrite. He has heard it and will continue to hear it for a long time," Lorraine responds, unblinking. "But I'm still going to say sorry to you, for another reason, if ye don't mind."

Ghost shifts in his seat, uncomfortable.

"I'm sorry," she says. "For how I treated you, especially in that kitchen the other day."

Ghost starts. He hadn't been expecting *that*.

“Your scars,” She continues. “I thought... Well, it doesn’t matter what I thought. I was wrong. My son loves you, all of you.” She smirks. “He said as much. I would like to learn to love you too.”

*Love.*

Ghost’s stomach plummets to the ground.

“I don’t know if you can,” he responds, hoarse.

“Let me and my family try,” Lorraine says, undeterred. “Maybe you’ll learn to love us too.”

He wonders if he might get sick. He wonders if this whole night is an unusually cruel fever dream his brain cooked up for him. The ache to wake up and feel the cold sting of reality nips at him, but no matter how hard he pinches his forearm, he stays rooted in this pipedream.

“You want to love me,” he croaks. “Just because your son does?”

“Oh, Ghost,” Soap’s mother looks a mix between amused and sad. “If love were that easy, there would be no need for religion and war, eh?” She shakes her head. “Him loving you is a good starting point, I’m just hoping the rest of us will make it to the end, on our own terms.”

She touches the air above his wrist and, somehow, Ghost can feel that too.

“And I’m hoping it’s the same for you too.”

“You can’t,” he whispers, raw and afraid.

*I can’t.*

“Maybe I can, maybe I can’t,” Lorraine shrugs. “But rumor has it, you make my son the happiest man alive.” Her smile could cause the rise and fall of empires. Ghost aches for his mother’s own heartstopping-stopping grin now, more than ever. “Now, how could we not learn to love someone like that?”

Ghost could shatter at her feet. Her face is so like Soap’s, her words cocoon him in warmth, and he so badly wants to believe her. He almost let’s go.

*I love you.*

But he hears the chimes of his father’s laughter and the taste of iron in

his mouth. He can smell his brother's cigarettes and the blood of his nephew at his feet. He feels the fists against his cheek and the snake venom and—

He steels himself.

"It's not real," he says, as coolly as possible. He looks straight ahead at Soap's mother and reveals the truth. "Our relationship, everything, it's all fake."

For a second, one terrible perfect second, Lorraine looks stunned.

Ghost wants to bask in it, in the betrayal that must be roiling in her gut, he wants to revel in the sudden leverage he suddenly has over her, no matter how petty. But bile keeps rising in his throat at the sight of her face. Suddenly, terrifyingly, he wants to take those words back and shove them back down to the inner depths of the earth.

But he can't.

"Johnny's cousin," Ghost continues, forcing the poisonous words out one by one. "What he saw in that pub was a misunderstanding. Johnny decided to play along for you and the rest of your family, but we aren't together. We never have been."

He can't look at Lorraine's face without wanting to hurl across her nice shag carpet, so he fixes his gaze somewhere past her ear.

"It wasn't real," he spits. "None of it was."

The minutes tick by.

"Really?" is all Lorraine asks.

"Yes," Ghost says. "Really."

For a second, he wonders if Soap's mother will start hurling curses at him. Then, he wonders if she'll storm out of the room, leaving Ghost alone with his thoughts. She does neither of those things.

"So, you don't care about John?" She asks.

Ghost whips his head up, fury coursing through his veins.

“Of course I bloody do,” he snarls. The emotion in his voice almost startles him silent, but he licks his lips and continues. “That’s why I’m here in the first place. He’s the only reason why.”

“He’s the only reason why you came?” Lorraine leans forward, though her hands stay clasped in her lap, a safe distance away from Ghost. It’s all he can do from leaning back in his seat “Is he the only thing keeping you here too?”

The automatic response is to affirm her words. There was nothing for him in Scotland other than Soap, nothing that could ever amount to as much anywhere else in the world. His eyes dart away from Lorraine’s inquiring ones and lands on the floor of the sitting room.

It’s littered with crayons and toys, Blake’s stuffies of various animals, and Maisie’s action figures striking heroic poses. Rebecca’s green sweater is draped haphazardly over Sarah’s mountain of textbooks. David’s running shoes are tucked in the corner of the room, right next to Lorraine’s flats. Soap’s deck of cards sits on the couch next to Ghost.

It was strange, being able to place labels on the clutter in the house. He wonders when he began matching a person to a thing and a thing to a person.

“I don’t,” Ghost blinks. “I don’t know.”

Lorraine hums, contemplative.

“So, you don’t make John happy?”

Ghost’s fingers twitch by his side, tracing out the familiar curve of Soap’s grin without his consent. He’s burned that smile into his brain; he’s seen it enough to carve a monument out of Soap’s mouth alone.

He swallows hard.

“I don’t know.”

“Do you love him?”

And that was the million-dollar question. He could lie and say no. He could. He could. *He could—*

*Stay.*

He nods, and that movement alone sends every muscle in his body screaming in protest. But he doesn't take it back.

Lorraine rises in her seat, as graceful as a queen. When Ghost looks up, she tilts her head at him, as if in parting. Before she leaves though, she turns back to him, a solemn look in her eyes.

"It cannae all be a lie, then," she says. "If you love him and he loves you."

"He doesn't," Ghost blurts out. Desperation tinges his voice raw and hoarse. "He can't."

But even as he says those words, he thinks of Soap's face inches from his, and the way his mouth had curved into the softest version of a grin Ghost had ever seen grace Soap's face. The words, the three words, ring like a mantra in his ears.

The look Lorraine fixes him is almost pitying.

"Can't he?" She asks. "You might be a bad actor, Ghost, but John's failed drama. Twice. I think you would know if he was lying to you, eh? I think we all would."

She smiles at him, a smaller, more reserved smile this time, but the sight of it still shocks him to his core. He's undeserving of her kindness, of her silent forgiveness, but he still wants to drown it—boots and all.

"Let him love you," she suggests. "Let us learn to love you."

"It's not that easy," Ghost repeats, for the second time that night, to a different MacTavish. "It can't be." He had known love to be a battle of teeth and claws; it was coughing up blood and reaching for the untouchable sky. It couldn't be this soft nor this easy.

"No, it's not," This MacTavish says, this time. "But do you want it, regardless?"

*He wants nothing more.*

She nods, like she heard his silent answer, and bids him goodnight. Then, Soap's mother leaves him—sat in her sitting room, surrounded by whisps of her family.

He sits and thinks.

Ghost finds Soap at the first peek of dawn.

The other man is sat on his bed, phone cupped in between his hands. A frown mars his handsome face and that wayward curl falls into his eye. Ghost inhales at the sight of him, the breath knocked out of his chest at the mere existence of a man like John MacTavish.

He waits for a beat before speaking, if only to get air back into his lungs.

“Johnny.”

Soap’s head shoots up.

“L.t.,” he breathes out. Then, he stands, pocketing his phone. A determined look crosses his face, overshadowing whatever bout of emotion was threatening to break free from the surface.

“Listen, L.t.,” Soap says. “I’m sorry. That was a line I shouldn’t have crossed and that’s fucked up. You dinnae deserve that,” he rubs his jaw and offers Ghost a twisted grin. “You awrite, sir?”

That smile suddenly wipes everything from Ghost’s brain and leaves nothing but the thought:

*You’re so fucking bloody stupid.*

“I am,” he says, in response to both Soap and himself.

“Good,” Soap runs a hand through his hair, causing it to stick up in an odd direction. “I’m glad.”

Ghost crosses his arms and leans back against the door. He isn’t sure what to say next, doesn’t have a map for the unfamiliar stretch of road ahead.

“I was going to leave,” he says.

Soap stills, staring at him.

“I almost made it out,” Ghost admits. “But Blake stopped me.”

“Blake?” Soap asks, winded.

“He was,” Ghost grimaces and looks to the side. “He was panicked. Real anxious.”

“Shite,” Soap suddenly bolts up, striding towards the door. The set of his jaw is determined, sharp enough to cut glass. “How panicked? Is he awrite? Where is he now?”

Ghost touches his shoulder, warmth seeping in through his palm, to still the other.

“He’s fine,” he says. “He’s asleep in his bed.”

He feels the nervous energy sap out of Soap at his words and relief sends his muscles slackening.

“Thank God,” Soap breathes out. He worries his teeth on his bottom lip, hard enough to break skin. “He’s been having these attacks more often. I dinnae ken why. We can’t figure it out. Sarah says it might have something to do with some neurochemical imbalance or something, but—”

Soap shrugs helplessly. “I dinnae ken. He’s not a veteran or an active soldier. I dinnae ken that people like him could get like that,” he frowns. “At least not that young.”

“Does it matter?” Ghost asks. He rubs a thumb along Soap’s clavicle.

“Of course it does,” Soap says, headstrong as always. His gaze drifts off, into some private, foreign territory Ghost wants to follow him into. “How can we help him if we don’t know the reason behind what we’re helping?”

“Like this,” Ghost says and digs his thumb harder into Soap’s skin. Soap starts and his vision clears. He refocuses back on Ghost with a pensive expression.

“Like what?” he asks.

“By being here like this,” Ghost says. “By staying.”

Soap looks away.

“Is that why you’re still here?” he asks, his voice barely above a rasp. “For him?”

“And if I was?” Ghost asks, though he thinks: *Not quite. Not entirely.*

Soap’s brow pinches for a second before relaxing into a placid facade.

“Then I would have to thank you,” he looks back at Ghost. “Ah ken it meant the world to him. He likes you a lot.”

Ghost feels his mouth curve into a slight grin.

“Do you?” He asks. “Do you like your nephew?”

Soap doesn’t snort at the seemingly obvious question. He nods, without hesitation.

“I do, L.t. You know I do.”

Ghost does. *Christ, he does.*

Ghost leans back and withdraws his hand from Soap’s skin. He meets Soap’s green stare with his own, despite his stomach twisting and turning in protest. A bead of sweat makes it way down his spine.

“My turn,” he says.

Soap squints at him.

“Ask me the same question,” Ghost watches the realization dawn in Soap’s eyes. The other man’s throat bobs for a second before he asks, so quietly Ghost nearly doesn’t recognize his voice.

“Do you like your nephew?”

Ghost watches Soap’s features for a beat.

“I do,” he admits. “Joseph made me laugh. He was loud and a prankster. He put frogs in my brother’s bed one time, because he was cross with him.”

Soap raises his eyebrows, amusement flitting across his face.

“He loved to sing, like a little canary,” Ghost thinks of Joseph’s sweet voice filling his brother’s home. “All day and all night. He loved talking too. Could talk your ear off if you gave him the chance.”

“I like him already,” Soap replies.

*I knew you would.*



“He would like you,” Ghost says, through the bittersweet taste in his mouth. Tommy, Beth, Joseph, and his mum. They would like him, hell, they would probably fall in love with Soap on the spot. “I think they would all like you.”

Soap hums. “I want them to,” he admits. “I want them to like me as much as mine likes you.”

“Why?” Ghost can’t help but ask.

“Because they’re your family,” Soap responds, simply. “Because you love them.”

Ghost blinks, emotions welling in his chest.

“That’s a strange reason to like someone, don’t you think?”

“No,” Soap shakes his head. “It’s not.”

Ghost looks at the man before him.

“I want to love what you love. I want to know what you know. I want —” Soap wets his lips with his tongue. “I want to understand everything about you.”

“Why?” Ghost asks him again.

“For fuck’s sake,” Soap explodes, his face flushing red. “Because you’re my friend. Because Blake adores you and Maisie talks about you constantly. Because my sisters like you and my maw smiles when you enter the room. Because you stayed. Because I fucking lo—”

He freezes and purses his lips shut, but Ghost hears his words as clear as day.

“Say it,” he urges the other, his heart pounding.

“I cannae,” Soap’s eyes dart away. “You...The safeword—”

“Do you hear me saying the safeword? Are you going to say it?” Ghost asks. He steps closer to Soap. “Finish what you were saying.”

Soap shakes his head.

“Dinnae make me say it again if you’re just gonna...” he clears his throat. His eyes flash, though Ghost isn’t sure what emotion is causing them to glow like that. *Anger? Desperation? Something else entirely?*

“Dinnae be that fuckin’ cruel, Simon.”

A sweeter man might have backed up at that. But there are no good men standing in the room and Ghost doesn’t pretend to be. He places his hand on the back of Soap’s neck, threading his fingers into the short hairs on the nape of his neck. He waits for a sign of rejection, but Soap stays still, staring up at Ghost with those eyes of his.

“Johnny,” he coaxes.

“Bastard,” Soap breathes out. Then he looks away, almost slumping in defeat. “I love you. You know it. I know it. Hell, half the fuckin’ world probably knows it.”

*I love you. I love you. I love you.*

“It’s not easy.”

“I wouldn’t want it to be,” Soap responds. “If it were easy, it wouldn’t be you.”

Ghost raises a brow.

“Are you calling me difficult?”

“I am, ye smartarse,” Soap affirms, without missing a beat. Ghost would be amused if he wasn’t so fucking enamored with the force of nature in front of him. “And yet...”

And yet, Soap was facing him, feet rooted to the ground. Yet, here he was, beautiful and devastating in ways no other man or woman could even dream of being. Here he fucking was—a pipedream cementing into something a little more tangible.

Moving his hand from the back of Soap’s neck to the front, Ghost taps out a rhythm on Soap’s bobbing Adam’s apple. Soap’s eyes widen, surprised, but he goes pliant at the hand on his throat. Ghost could swallow him whole right then and there.

“You want to know what I know?” he asks. “You want to love what I love, Johnny?”

Soap blinks at up him. He reaches up and wraps a hand around Ghost’s wrist, holding him in place.

“I do,” Soap responds. Somehow, Ghost believes him. “I really do.”

“It’ll be real easy for you, then,” Ghost presses his fingers in a little harder into the side of Soap’s neck, feeling the muscle there. Soap gasps and leans into the touch, his cheeks taking on a brighter flush. The truth tumbles out Ghost’s mouth, dislodging itself from his own throat in an almost painful pop. “You only need to look in the mirror, love.”

“Simon,” Soap breathes out.

“Johnny,” Ghost responds.

“Let me love you,” Soap nearly begs. Ghost wants to bottle the sound and store it in a wine cellar, letting it marinate and fester, away from prying eyes and hands. He wants to present it to the world in a glass bottle. He *wants* and for once, he doesn’t push all the want away.

He leans in closer, letting his lips brush against Soap’s.

“Stay,” Soap whispers. “Stay here with me.”

*I will*, Ghost thinks and lets Soap grasp at his hips with desperate, warm hands. *For as long as you’ll have me.*

“Okay,” Ghost responds. “Okay, Johnny.”

When they kiss, mouths slotting together in harmony, Ghost can only think: *I love you. I love you. Oh Christ, I fucking love you.*

Soap leads him down on the bed, somehow both insistent and gentle all at once. Ghost has no idea how he does it, but he isn’t complaining.

He doesn’t think he can complain about anything right now, with his cheeks flushing pink and desire clouding his brain. Soap looms over him, his smile outshining both the moon and sun.

“Baby,” he whispers after a searing kiss and Ghost fights a keen rising in the back of his throat. “Simon.”

“Johnny,” Ghost parrots back. He sounds husky and unfamiliar in his own ears. “Love.”

“Can I fuck you?” Soap murmurs, trailing a hand down Ghost’s chest

and onto his stomach. He splays a possessive hand across Ghost's abs, the weight of it nearly enough to drag Ghost down to the bottom of the ocean. "Please?"

"Hm," Ghost hums, and brushes a thumb across Soap's mouth. Soap takes it into his lips without a fight, hollowing his cheeks out and *sucking* it into the heat of his mouth. Ghost presses it against the other's tongue, trying not to groan at the feeling of Soap against him.

Soap nips at his thumb, before not so subtly rutting against Ghost's thigh. Ghost wraps an arm around Soap's waist and squeezes in a warning. Soap whines and tries the cheeky move again, but Ghost's arm around him keeps him still.

"Please," Soap murmurs around Ghost's thumb. His pupils are huge—dark and breathtakingly pretty.

Ghost almost smirks. He decidedly likes Soap like this.

"So polite," He murmurs.

Soap bats his eyelashes at him like *I'm always this polite, don't be stupid, L.t.*

Something like a laugh rises in Ghost's throat.

He pulls his hand away—Soap tries to chase him to no avail—and brings Soap back down for a kiss. It's not as rough as it was before nor as desperate. It's soft enough to dissolve into nothing, like cotton candy and fairytale wishes, and it leaves Ghost wanting more.

He kisses Soap again, just because he can.

"Fuck me," he rasps against Soap's lips. "Since you asked so nicely."

When Soap slides into him, Ghost can do little but hold the other closer. Soap goes willingly, because of course he does, and he lets Ghost press bruises onto his hips, back, and waist without complaint. He's so perfect, Ghost wants to rip into him.

"You, *ah*, feel so fuckin' good," Soap rasps against his neck. "You feel like heaven, Simon."

With each rock of Soap's hips, Ghost bites back a groan. He wants to stay here forever, wants to keep Soap and meld him into his chest. He presses an open-mouthed kiss against Soap's jaw, feeling it flex under

his lips.

“You feel better,” he says because it’s true.

When Soap’s pace becomes erratic, signaling that he’s close, the other wraps a hand around Ghost. The feeling of his fingers, thick and coarse, against Ghost nearly makes him weep. He throws his head back and grits his teeth, trying not to cum.

“Simon,” Soap gasps out. “Simon, I—”

Ghost lifts a hand of his own and places it on the base of Soap’s neck. He doesn’t squeeze, doesn’t claw through Soap’s jugular. *Not yet.*

He digs a knuckle into the hollow of Soap’s throat and feels the other man shudder on top of him. *He liked that.* Ghost does it again, harder this time, and Soap moans through clamped teeth.

“Harder,” he whispers the mantra. “Fuck, baby, harder.”

“Slag,” Ghost taunts and feels Soap thrust in more roughly in retaliation. He chokes back his own moan and squeezes down on Soap’s neck. Soap claws at Ghost’s hips at the feeling, hard enough to bleed, and Ghost *smiles*.

They pant into each other’s mouths—not quite kissing, but unwilling to part long enough to breathe.

“I-I,” Soap’s words are hot, burning Ghost up from the inside out. “I’m gonna—”

“Cum,” Ghost commands and Soap does. He watches Soap’s face twist in pleasure and the sight is enough for him to tip over the edge as well.

They lie together, Soap’s face buried into Ghost’s neck and Ghost’s arms wrapped around his waist. He could die here and he’d die without regrets. Elation blooms in Ghost’s chest, a foreign flame growing brighter and hotter in his ribcage. He tries not to fall in love with the feeling, but before he can draw out his armory, Soap exhales.

He twists, just enough to press a kiss on the corner of Ghost’s mouth, right on his Glasgow smile.

Ghost melts into it, despite everything.

“I love you,” Soap says. “I really do.”

Ghost traces the shape of a crescent against Soap's bare hip. Soap snorts at the feeling and knocks their foreheads together. Ghost's lips twitch at the sound.

"I know," he says. Soap hums, satisfied, and kisses the delicate skin under Ghost's eye. He pulls away, just long enough to say: "Just don't ever forget it."

"You'll just have to remind me every day, then," Ghost teases.

"Didn't know your memory was *that* boggin'," Soap jabs back. "But awrite, if you insist."

Ghost watches the daylight streaming from the window, caressing Soap and his childhood bedroom in a soft light. He watches Soap's eyes turn honey-gold and his smile turn into something kind. He touches that grin with the tips of his fingers, reverential.

The sound of a coffee machine turning on downstairs interrupts his thoughts.

He hears the sound of Lorraine and David murmuring to each other over the coffee machine. Rebecca will still be snoring away in her room while Sarah is hard at work on her laptop in the dining room. In a few short minutes, he knows he'll hear Blake and Maisie zipping up and down the stairs, chasing each other through the hallways.

"Shite," Soap mutters, "I'm fuckin' starvin'."

He peels away from Ghost and pulls his rumpled clothes on. "Let's get breakfast," he says. "I told maw I'll help with pancakes today."

"And by 'you'll help,'" Ghost pulls his own shirt on over his head and shimmies into the rest of his clothes. "You meant I'll help and you'll antagonize your sisters by throwing pancake batter at them."

"I thought that was obvious," Soap snickers. He stands, about to head for the door. Ghost reaches out and places a hand on his wrist, stopping him.

Soap turns, a question in his eyes.

"I love you," Ghost confesses. It's both easy and not easy to admit it out loud. He grasps Soap's wrist a little tighter. "Just thought you should know."

Soap smiles.

“I know.”

## Chapter End Notes

thank you sm for reading!! this was my first long fic and probably my last so you all have made my experience so so so wonderful. thank you again mwah and have a great day!

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